

Author • Yuishi Artist • Kagachisaku

volume

1

An Introvert's

HOOKUP HICCUPS:

This **GYARU** Is Head Over Heels for Me!



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Prologue: We Have No Relationship

That day, like any other day, began and ended without any particular incident. Or at least that's how it was supposed to play out.

"Yo, you wanna go do karaoke? I feel like a song or two."

"What? But it's only Monday!"

"Oh, come on. I'll blow this gloomy Monday away with one note of my beautiful voice!"

As I prepared to head home, the voices of the most extroverted of my peers calling out to their friends entered my ears. They were the popular kids —those at the top of the school caste.

"Hey, you guys come too! Let's hear some anime songs for a change."

The extroverts had addressed the class's group of otaku, guys who weren't that unlike me. The otaku guys reacted in a grandiose manner as they gladly accepted the invitation.

Fortunately, in my class, there was no bullying of any kind. At least, none that I knew of. The students each had their own clique, which inevitably determined who had a say in what and who had the most authority, but on a basic level, the different groups tended to get along.

I was probably the only exception. I didn't belong to any particular group, and I basically only said a few words to my classmates every now and then, so I didn't have any close friends there. Even now, no one took any notice of me while they chatted about their karaoke plans.

In the middle of it all, having seemingly made up his mind, one of the guys called out to a group of three girls—three of the most eye-catching girls in the class. His voice rose shakily, as though he were nervous.

"Hey, Nanami, you guys are coming too, right? It won't be any fun unless you

three are there.”

Despite the male student’s resolve, the response he got was far from positive. A girl with black hair spun around and waved her hand, declining the invitation immediately.

“Oh, I think we’ll pass this time. We have something to take care of with Nanami. You guys have fun!”

“Oh, come on. Doing karaoke with everyone is way more fun—”

“If you don’t drop it...” The black-haired girl turned a terrifying smile on the guy, who withdrew dejectedly.

“Oh, okay, okay. The three of you aren’t coming this time; I get it.”

At that, the female student nodded, satisfied. Behind her, the girl he’d called out to—Nanami—seemed somewhat relieved, or was that just my imagination?

All three girls were what you’d think of if you imagined a typical gyaru—that is, they were showing a lot of skin and seemed like they were pretty experienced with guys—so perhaps it had been my imagination. Her name was...Nanami, right? It was a name I thought I’d heard somewhere before, but I couldn’t really remember where.

Well, that has nothing to do with me, I thought as I left the classroom.

Even outside it, I could hear them deciding among themselves on a decent karaoke bar, but my own mind was already occupied with thoughts of playing my online game when I got back home.

You see, this was just a difference between having friends in class and having friends outside of it. I simply chose to prioritize hanging out with friends I’d made online. That’s all.

With that considered, thoughts about my classmates heading off for karaoke and the group of gyaru who already had plans quickly disappeared from my mind. I had no relationship with these people—people that I’d never have anything to do with. Those three eye-catching gyaru in particular would never be interested in me.

Or at least, that’s what I thought until that day.

I never even imagined it. I never imagined that those girls... No. I never imagined that I would become deeply involved with *that* girl, a girl I had no relationship with, and that so many things would change.

Whether that was good or bad, the present me had yet to discover.

Chapter 1: Confession on a Dare

The girls' voices reverberated throughout the classroom, which had been left near empty now that the rest of our classmates had set off for karaoke.

"Nanami loses! It's decided —Nanami faces the penalty!"

"Pe-nal-ty! Pe-nal-ty! Yaaay, I'm so glad it's not me!"

"Huuuh, why me?!"

The gyaru—the girls at the top of the class caste system; the embodiment of extroverted, beautiful, and cute; and thus the girls who already belonged to the winning team in life—were, for some reason, playing cards in our classroom after school.

They didn't seem to be betting money; instead, they were setting up a game of some sort—a game where the loser had to face a dare. I was impressed that, despite their gaudy appearances, they would play their card game so wholesomely.

I, Yoshin Misumai, had no direct contact with the girls in question but had just so happened to come across the scene. I'd forgotten something in the classroom and caught them here—with no intention of eavesdropping, of course. But since I'm an introvert without much of a presence, it seemed that they hadn't even noticed me.

It was ironic, really. That is, being an introvert when the "yo" in my name meant "extroverted." I sure wasn't living up to the name. Not that I really cared.

For the time being, I couldn't help but wonder what was so important about their penalty game that it had kept them from joining their friends for karaoke. Couldn't they have just made the karaoke a part of the game?

Well, it had nothing to do with me. It was time I forgot about the whole thing and headed home. It was no big deal—I'd just forgotten my pencil case.

I grabbed the container from my desk, put it in my bag, and began to leave

the classroom. As I'd imagined, the girls continued talking without noticing me.

My seat was at the back, and the door was open, so I hadn't made a sound when I entered. But considering how loud they were being, even if the door had been closed, the sound of me opening it would probably have been drowned out anyway.

"As for the penalty... Let's go for a confession! Tomorrow after school, I dare you to go bare your heart to a guy you don't normally talk to!"

"Oh, that's good! Confessing on a dare... That's a classic!"

"Huh? A confession?"

The girl who had been sentenced to the penalty... Her name was...Nanami, wasn't it? Yeah, I was pretty sure it was Nanami Barato-san.

Barato-san responded in a tone that signaled displeasure and, despite wearing an unreasonably short skirt, crossed her legs on the desk she was sitting on. From the front, her secrets probably would've been in full view, but I suppressed my desire to circle around to the spot in front of her.

Hey, even introverts have sex drives, so I couldn't help wanting to do so. Not that I had the courage to go stand there and look.

"Toying with someone's emotions is the worst! You can't ask someone out on a *dare*. A confession has to be more serious, like to someone you're really into!"

"You keep saying that, but you're the only one of the three of us who doesn't have a boyfriend, you know?"

Barato-san didn't have a boyfriend? I'd thought for sure all three of them had boyfriends.

Anyway, I'd thought that since she was a gyaru, she'd be all into the whole hooking up on a dare thing, but it turned out she actually had some common sense. What she was saying was perfectly reasonable.

"Right, right. But come on, you're the hottest one here, and people ask you out all the time, but you always turn them down, don't you?"

"Uh... That's because...guys are kinda scary, and...when they ask me out while they're just ogling me the whole time, it's like..."

So she thinks men are scary, huh? Again, this was unexpected. Perhaps that relieved expression I'd glimpsed earlier hadn't just been my imagination.

While her two friends—whose names I'd already forgotten—continued talking, their voices full of concern, Barato-san remained silent.

Hey, wait, you need to speak up, Barato-san! You're right about this. Don't give in—stick it out! Having formed a better opinion of her, I rooted for her in my mind. Just mentally, of course, not out loud.

"You don't know the first thing about guys, Nanami. So, for now, try asking out a guy who seems harmless, and go out with him for at least a month! That's your penalty."

"What?! For a *month*?"

"It doesn't matter how you get started. You just have to get used to guys. We're worried about you. At this rate, we're afraid you're gonna get attacked by some weirdo."

All things considered, it seemed the two friends were worried about Barato-san in their own way—even if they were going about it in the wrong manner.

Come to think of it, I was totally eavesdropping, but there was no way I could leave now. I was curious to hear Barato-san's answer. Fortunately, I hadn't been noticed yet. What was a guy to do?

"Let's see... We should go for a no-libido or celibate type, who wouldn't try to pounce on you when you're alone."

"It's just a dare, so there's no need to force yourself to keep going out with them, but of course it's okay if you do! And anyway, even if you two do break up, if he doesn't know it was on a dare in the first place, he wouldn't be that hurt either, right? I mean, if *you* confess to him and he gets to go out with you for a whole month, he'll be totally happy! And we'll *never* spill that we dared you to do it!"

Both friends were thoroughly into the idea and continued goading Barato-san to do it. True, if they dated for a month and the guy didn't find out, his feelings wouldn't get hurt. In fact, that month might even feel like a reward, except... Did these girls realize? Did they have any idea how a guy confessed to by

Barato-san would be looked at by other guys?

Nanami Barato.

Thinking the name sounded familiar, I culled through my memories and recalled an anecdote about her. It was the name of the girl made legendary for having attacked, exploded, and sunk the love boats of numerous good-looking guys.

It was such a well-known rumor that even I knew about it, and to go out with that legendary girl would for sure mean being looked at by said good-looking guys with eyes filled with jealousy and envy.

If I were that guy—the guy that she chose to go out with—I didn't think I'd be able to stand it. My stomach would be filled with holes, and instead of sweat, digestive fluids would come spurting out of my body. In the end, I'd dissolve into oblivion.

It sounds like a joke, but that's just how high the hurdle was.

I didn't know who the guy was who would taste heaven and hell simultaneously—the guy to be both envied and pitied—but that was no concern of mine. I wished him the best in a situation that was none of my business. I'd overheard the details about the confession and the one month of dating, but I'd keep it all to myself.

Having made up my mind, I was about to stop eavesdropping and sneak away unnoticed when their next words froze me in place.

"Then, tomorrow, go confess to the quietest guy in class: Yoshin Misumai!"

Was it my imagination, or did I just hear a familiar name?

"Misumai, huh? I guess if it's him... Yeah, okay. I'll do it!"

Oh? So the name of the guy to be envied and pitied was Yoshin Misumai. That sure sounded familiar. Yeah, that sounded like a very near and dear name. I bet we'd get along.

No, wait. Was there someone else in our class—or in our school, even—with that same exact name? No, there wasn't. This wasn't the time to be escaping reality.

Um, I'm here. I heard everything.

Hey, wait. I'm gonna be confessed to tomorrow? By Barato-san? Should I prepare myself for this?

"But how am I supposed to confess?"

"Huh? I mean, if you just ask him to meet you behind the school building and tell him you like him, that's all it takes, right?"

"It's like in a shojo manga! Good luck, Nanami!"

"Speaking of which, how did you guys confess to your boyfriends?"

Having heard enough, I set off home, unnoticed by the three girls who had begun chattering about their own confessions. With my head spinning with the plans I'd just witnessed, I felt uncharacteristically perturbed.

Fortunately, no one had arrived home just yet, so my state of shock passed by unseen.



Canyon: ...And that's what happened, Baron-san. What should I do?

Baron: Ha ha ha, confessing on a dare, huh? How very high school. Ah, the joy of youth.

Back at home, I was discussing today's happenings with Baron-san, who belonged to the same team as I did in one of our online games. I wasn't comfortable with voice chat, so I took the liberty to play in a way that was comfortable for me: using my phone to chat and my computer to play.

A team-based tournament was starting today, and despite being in the middle of the qualifiers, I was asking him about my personal problems. I felt bad about it, but he had very graciously accepted my request for help.

Although I had no friends at school, there were loads of people I could talk to online. It doesn't matter where your friends are these days. Even online friends are friends—it just so happened that I didn't seek any out at school.

Canyon: It's no laughing matter, Baron-san. Please try putting yourself in my shoes...

Baron: But these aren't my shoes, and it's hilarious. Anyway, how did they not notice you? They

singled you out as someone who's quiet, so your presence can't be going that unnoticed. It's a relief, really.

That was a surprise for me too.

Actually, I was more surprised by the fact that the three of them knew my name than I was by the whole penalty game thing. Before now, I'd just assumed they didn't know my face *or* name.

Perhaps the reason I'd been able to sneak out of the classroom successfully was that the three of them hadn't realized I was there at all.

And perhaps I was going to face that confession tomorrow.

Canyon: But what should I do? It's all just a dare...

Baron: Well, it's not so bad, is it? You should just go out with her. You don't have a girlfriend, right? You can think of this as an opportunity for her to get used to boys and for you to get used to girls.

I couldn't help but sigh at the chat response from Baron-san, who seemed to be taking all this way too lightly. How easy would it have been if I could make that choice?

Peach: I'm against it! Toying with someone's emotions like that... You have to reject her, Canyon-san!

Canyon: I appreciate that you're getting angry on my behalf, but you can't say that so easily, Peach-san.

Canyon was the name of my in-game character, and the one who'd piped up with concern was Peach-san, a girl on the same team whom I got along pretty well with. That said, I'd never met Baron-san or Peach-san in real life, so I didn't actually know their genders, but Peach-san was most likely female.

Peach: Why not? You're only being confessed to, so you should just reject her.

Baron: Now, now. Deep breaths, Peach-chan.

Baron-san was doing his best to pacify Peach-san for me. There were just the three of us in the chat; other folks were too busy fighting their way through the qualifiers to join in the conversation.

This is the chat for the entire team, so I bet they're all going to see this later. I was anxious just thinking about it, but at least we had the chat to ourselves for now.

Peach-san had told me to reject the confession, but it really wasn't that simple. If an introvert like me were to reject Barato-san, just how many people would I make enemies of?

Of course, she'd be the one in the wrong for doing this because she'd been dared to, but that tidbit of information was only known to the parties involved. Barato-san would be at an advantage in every other regard—in terms of her social position, I mean.

Damned if I said yes, damned if I said no... That was why I needed Baron-san's advice.

Baron: So I take it you feel you're damned either way?

My heart skipped a beat as Baron-san seemingly read my mind. How could this guy know exactly what I was thinking, with only a text chat to go off of? This was precisely why I'd chosen to ask this guy for advice.

Baron: Then just say yes. It'd be more beneficial for the both of you.

Canyon: And by beneficial you mean...?

Baron: I mean that you'll get loads of curious and disapproving looks no matter what you say. She's popular, right?

Canyon: Yeah, that's what I've heard.

Now that I thought about it, Barato-san was pretty sought-after by guys. With her sweet and chipper personality and her tendency not to discriminate against her classmates, guys at school seemed to fall for her every single day, each clinging to a rose-tinted misconception that maybe she liked them.

It was her fashion that identified her as a gyaru. I'd only ever seen her in her school uniform, but she wore it in such a way as to maximize its cuteness without breaking any school rules. Her short skirt, for example, struck that fine line between keeping her covered and flashing her underwear.

She would also leave her shirt unbuttoned at the top, revealing a generous portion of cleavage between twin mounds that seemed out of place on a high school student. This was part of the reason I'd had the impression she liked to fool around with guys, but...

I didn't expect her to be that inexperienced. I guess that's why she turned down all the good-looking guys that confessed to her, whether they be handsome sports team captains; handsome bad boys; or handsome, serious, studious types.

I had mistakenly thought she was in a position to take her pick of anyone she liked, but because she was so unaccustomed to men, not one of them had a chance of dating her to begin with.

People aren't always as they seem. I'd do better to remember that.

Granted, I was just as much of a sucker as any of those guys, but being confessed to by a girl like that was beyond unexpected, even if she had been dared to do it.

Baron: You'll leave a better impression as the guy who was confessed to by the popular girl and got dumped a month later, than as the guy who flat out rejected her. Besides, you should think of this as an opportunity.

Canyon: An opportunity?

I began to wonder if Baron-san was talking about what he'd said earlier about me getting used to women, but as it turned out, that wasn't what he meant at all.

Baron: If you were to accept her confession, you'd be going out with her for at least a month, right? Then during that month, how about you try to make her smitten with you?

Peach: Baron-san?! What are you saying?!

Canyon: Huh?

Peach-san was shocked at Baron-san's suggestion, while my response was downright idiotic.

Baron: Oh, maybe "smitten" is kind of old-fashioned. Did I sound old?

That's not what we're so surprised by, Baron-san.

My hands paused at the unexpected suggestion. Peach-san seemed just as speechless.

Baron: Look, you have a huge advantage: the fact that you already know she was dared to do it.

Canyon: Right... Yes, I do know that. But is that really an advantage?

Baron: Sure is. Think about it. What would happen if you didn't know? You'd be elated, thinking she had a crush on you, wouldn't you?

That was certainly true. Even as an introvert... No. *Especially* because I was an introvert, the feeling of superiority that would come with being "chosen" by one of the popular girls would have brought about a considerable change in me.

Canyon: Well, I would definitely be happy. I might get cocky for being chosen by her and get kinda carried away.

Getting so full of myself when I didn't even have any friends would be ridiculous.

Baron: If that were the case, you'd go through all that only for her to break up with you a month later. But because you know this is a dare, you'll be able to accept the situation calmly.

Calmly... Do I seem like I'm calm to you? I'm talking to you precisely because I'm not calm.

Baron-san continued explaining, paying no mind at all to my thoughts.

Baron: You should work hard for a month to get her to like you, and then you can break up with her yourself. If not, you can continue going out with her. The choice is yours, but...if it were up to me, I'd say your life would be way more fun if you continued dating her.

Canyon: Baron-san, are you by any chance enjoying this?

Baron: Of course I am. Oh, and do keep me posted, okay? Hearing about the love affairs of a real high school student makes for an amusing pastime.

I slightly regretted having consulted Baron-san about this, but the more I listened to his logic, the more I came to think it made sense.

It could have been that my thoughts were being conveniently strung along, but it was ultimately his advice that helped me make up my mind—I was going to accept Barato-san's confession.

Baron: Oh, but do act like a good little high schooler. She's not comfortable around guys, so don't immediately get all touchy-feely.

Canyon: I would never!

An introvert doesn't have the guts for that! Besides, I was chosen for this precise reason. The whole premise would go up in smoke.

After that, I got back to the game while keeping an eye on Baron-san's advice. Peach-san was still against the idea, but maybe she gave up in the end, because she stopped replying.

Did I make her mad? She seemed worried about me, so I should apologize next time she replies back.

On a side note, we successfully made it through the qualifiers, only for me to be teased by my teammates later on...but that's a story for another day.



That night, maybe out of nervousness that I would soon be confessed to, I found it hard to get to sleep. Even at school the next morning, I was kind of spacing out, and with the near empty classroom so quiet, I was close to dozing off at my desk.

It was in that near empty classroom, with me in my absentminded state, that someone called out to me.

I turned toward the source of the voice, my gaze locking onto a pair of thighs visible from below a skirt, and... *No, no, I've got to look at her face.*

"Hey, Misumai, do you have time to talk after school today?"

As expected, the voice belonged to Barato-san. Her long brown hair looked soft as it swayed, and her voice was trembling slightly.

"Oh, yeah. No problem, Barato-san," I said.

"Thanks. Then I'll see you after school," she said.

In that near empty classroom in the early hours of the morning, that was all Barato-san said to me. She seemed somewhat brusque and nervous, or did it just seem that way because I knew the circumstances?

After her short exchange with me, she quickly returned to her two friends.

I didn't like to be tardy, so I usually arrived at the classroom early, but today, the girls were just as early as I was. Maybe they'd chosen to get here now so as not to create a scene.

The two friends avoided looking at me to an almost unnatural extent and were patting Barato-san on the back as they encouraged her. "Good job, Nanami. Good job!"

If I didn't already know the circumstances, I might have misunderstood. It was as if it had taken her a great heap of courage just to talk to me. Actually, since she wasn't used to guys, she would probably be nervous no matter who she was talking to.

From that point on, she and I had no contact at all until after school.

I tended to sit alone by default, only speaking a couple of words here and there with some of my classmates. She, on the other hand, hung around her friends or with the extroverts in the class. Our meeting after school never came up.

Still, it was impossible for me to put it out of my mind, so I stole glances at her from time to time. Maybe she felt similarly, because there were a few times

when our eyes met. Each time, she would turn away, seemingly flustered and blushing. If I wasn't already clued in, I could have easily misunderstood her reactions.

She had to be nervous. I was nervous too, but perhaps thanks to all the advice from Baron-san yesterday, I was able to remain somewhat calm.

And just like that, school ended, and the fated moment arrived.

"Thanks for waiting, Misumai. So, um, can you maybe come with me for a bit?"

Everyone else had left the classroom, so it was only me and Barato-san. Even her friends weren't there. Since it was only a dare, I had thought that she'd confess to me right there in the classroom, but it seemed she wanted to do this somewhere else.

Neither of us spoke as I followed behind her.

This wasn't looking good. I'd been so sure I was calm, but with every step I took, my nerves intensified. Not only that, but Barato-san's hips were shaking as she walked, making her short skirt sway and my gaze travel toward... *Oh shoot, this is not good! Remember what Baron-san told you yesterday.*

Baron: Now listen, women are more sensitive to eye contact than men think. When she's confessing, make sure you look her straight in the eyes. No matter what, don't look at her cleavage, her legs, or anywhere else you shouldn't be looking.

Right, stay calm. Stay calm. Look straight. As I remembered Baron-san's advice, I felt my composure returning.

We eventually arrived at the back of the school building, where the surrounding wall kept students from leaving the campus. The place was empty, so there was no danger of being seen. Instead, it was dangerous in the sense that there was no one there to keep an eye on you, and the random scrap lying around made the place seem like a health and safety hazard.

"Okay. This should be good!" Barato-san muttered to herself as she stopped and turned to face me. Her skirt fluttered as she spun, making it impossible for

me not to stare.

Even that small act made my heart jump, but I had to remain calm. *It's just a dare. Don't misunderstand.* But even knowing that, I couldn't help but feel my heart race.

Barato-san began speaking after putting a considerable amount of distance between us. I didn't know if that distance was there because she was wary of me or because she was wary around guys in general, but I waited quietly for her to finish before answering.

"Thanks for coming, Misumai. I, um, had something I wanted to say. Do you...know what that might be?"

"I'm sorry, uh... I've never really spoken to you before, Barato-san, so I'm not sure why you wanted to see me. If it's money you want, I don't really have much," I said, feigning naivety.

"I'm not trying to get money out of you or anything like that!" she cried.

Though I wasn't sure if I'd successfully duped her, things seemed to be going okay.

"Um... Well, I...uh... I..."

She continued fumbling for words, failing miserably to get to the point. She was the epitome of a girl gathering her courage in order to confess to someone. It didn't seem like a dare at all.

Even though I was nervous, despite knowing that it was a lie, I looked her square in the face, too afraid to take my eyes off hers for even a moment.

That said, the more I consciously did so, the more my gaze faltered.

Remember, Baron-san said to look up a little bit, not down in times like these.

If I looked down, it would seem as if I were staring at her body, but if I looked up, that could be avoided. *Upward... Up...*

Following his advice, I raised my eyes.

And so, it was thanks to that advice—but also by complete coincidence—that

I was able to see it.

“I...I-I-like...you, so, um, will you...go out...with me?”

Even before she'd finished speaking, I broke into a run toward her.

On a typical day at home, I would often either play games or lift weights while watching videos. I'd never heard anything about lifting weights making you run faster, and honestly, I'd never really run before, but...*if it's this short of a distance, I should be able to make it!*

Believe in yourself even if you have no basis for that belief! Make it in time!

What I'd spied by sheer coincidence was a large bucket peeking out of an open window. It was a bucket used for cleaning on campus, peeking out from the open window.

The moment I saw it, I remembered that this was the exact spot where students tended to toss the dirty water when they were too lazy to take it out. And at that same moment, Barato-san was under that bucket.

At this rate, she's gonna be drenched by filthy water.

The moment I thought that, my body moved without me thinking.

It wasn't like you'd get injured by being doused in dirty water, but you'd sure get drenched in filth.

Some would say it was a well-deserved punishment for confessing to me on a dare. But I couldn't feel that way. Even though it was a dare, seeing her standing there with that blush across her cheeks, trying to weave her words together...

Maybe it was all an act. But for Barato-san to get drenched in water when she was mustering up her courage to talk to a guy... Somehow, I just didn't want that.

“Huh? Eeeeeeeeeek?!”

Barato-san screamed when she noticed me closing the distance with such speed, but I covered her with my body without hesitation. *Thank god. I made it!*

Just as I breathed a sigh of relief, cold water slapped across my back. *Gah, it's more painful than I thought! It's cold, and it's dirty, and it hurts!* The cold water soaking into my uniform knocked down my body temperature immediately, turning me into a quivering mess.

Damn you! Don't clean with such cold water! Use warmer water! No, wait—don't toss it out the window in the first place!

"Huh? Wha...? What?! What is this?! Water?! Why?!"

Opening her eyes, Barato-san looked around from under me as if finally grasping the situation. Looking down at her, all I could think were out-of-place thoughts, like wondering if her shirt had gotten dirty because the ground wasn't paved or thinking her disheveled clothes were too tempting to the eye.

And then, before I could say anything, I received a blow across the back of my head. At the same time, I caught sight of the bucket at the edge of my vision. Apparently, the person who'd tossed the water from the window had been startled by Barato-san's scream and dropped the bucket. *At least keep hold of it, would you?*

There was a little bit of water left inside it, which spilled out onto the ground. *Good, if that had hit her, she might have been hurt,* I thought. I looked down at Barato-san's face and frowned when I saw a red spot on her cheek. *Oh, wait. Did she get hurt?*

"Are you okay? Barato-san...? Are you hurt?"

"I'm...okay. I mean, are *you* okay, Misumai?!"

"I'm okay, my body's just cold and damp. No injuries."

"You *are* injured! Your head's bleeding!"

It was then that I realized that I did in fact have a small cut on my head where the bucket had hit me and that the red spot on Barato-san's cheek was actually my blood.

"Oh, sorry... I shouldn't bleed on you. I'll move. You didn't get wet, did you, Barato-san?"

"Who cares about me?! It's you who's...!"

Those were the last words to reach my ears.

The moment I stood up, moving away from Barato-san, my body swayed. It seemed the impact of that bucket had been greater than I'd thought. I was suddenly overcome with that dizzy feeling that comes with standing up too fast, and all at once, the strength drained from my body.

"Misumai! Misumai?!"

The last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was Barato-san's worried voice screaming my name.



"Huh...? Is this the nurse's office?"

When I came to, the ceiling above me seemed somehow familiar. It was the ceiling of the nurse's office. It was reassuring to know where I was, but...

Why *was* I in the nurse's office?

If I remember right, I'm pretty sure I was talking to Barato-san, and...she'd just confessed to me... Oh, that's right. A bucket fell on my head, didn't it?

Just then, my thoughts were disrupted by a voice calling my name.

"Misumai?! Thank god! You're awake!"

It was a girl's voice, Barato-san's voice, and it was coming from next to me. Was she the one who'd carried me here?

"Oh, right. Did you bring me to the nurse's office, Barato-san? Thanks... I'm not exactly the lightest," I said.

"Thank goodness, you're awake! Thank goodness... Ugh..."

Without responding to my question, Barato-san began to cry, seemingly overwhelmed by joy and relief. While I felt bad that I'd made her worry, I was also kind of flattered that she would worry about a guy like me.

But come on, what did I matter? I was just glad Barato-san was okay. At any rate, she didn't seem to have changed out of her usual school uniform.

"Um, your clothes didn't get dirty, and you weren't injured, were you?" I asked her.

“Oh, no. Thanks to you, I’m fine. Wait, this isn’t about me! Are *you* okay?! You were bleeding so much! Did you catch anything from that dirty water? You’re not feeling sick, are you?”

Has there really been that much blood? I’d been treated, so I didn’t feel that much pain. I’ve heard you bleed a lot from your head, so maybe that was why.

Well, maybe the bump on my head does hurt a little. But it’s not a huge pain, and I don’t feel nauseous. It looks like I can even get up.

“I’m fine, but I’m glad you’re not hurt,” I told her. I sat up in bed and flashed her a smile, but she averted her gaze.

Huh? Had I made her mad? I didn’t remember saying anything to upset her, though.

Barato-san seemed a little flustered and began to speak while still turned away. “Um, Misumai, can you stay in bed? That way it’s...a little easier for me,” she said.

She was blushing and throwing sideways glances at me. Thinking her reaction was a little weird, I looked down at myself, only to find...I wasn’t wearing a shirt. Naked. I was buck naked. No wait, I was still covered down there, but still.

Even though it *was* just my upper body exposed, my face grew hot at the thought of a girl seeing me naked.

“I...I’m sorry! Talk about an eyesore!” I rushed to cover my body with the blanket and lay back down.

“N-No... But, um...you’re more muscular than you seem, huh? Like skinny but still kind of ripped. Oh, I mean, it’s not like I was staring or anything!”

Since I didn’t hang out with friends much, I spent most of my free time at home. This gave me plenty of opportunities to work out. I hadn’t thought my physique was all that useful, but for the first time, I could say that it had come in handy.

Barato-san and I fell silent—me from the embarrassment of having been seen naked by a girl and she from the embarrassment of having confessed that she’d seen a boy half-naked. This silence continued for a while, filling the air between

us until it was eventually broken by the arrival of the school nurse.

“Well, well, what do we have here? Two lovebirds, red in the face! Don’t tell me you were using my office for a rendezvous?” she asked.

Barato-san and I glowed even redder, but the nurse continued before we could deny her suggestion.

“Here you go, young man,” she said, handing me a change of clothes. “I packed up your dirty uniform for you to take to the dry cleaner’s, or you could go ahead and wash them yourself.”

I had things I wanted to say, but being relieved that the silence had been broken, I accepted the pile of clothes. As I did, I caught sight of Barato-san as she momentarily stepped out of the room.

The nurse had handed me a spare school uniform. When I asked, she said that they always had extra sets on hand for times like these. I was relieved that I wouldn’t have to go back to class or walk home in my gym clothes.

While I pulled my arm through the sleeve, the nurse summed up what had happened.

It seemed that after I’d collapsed, I’d been carried to the nurse’s office by a male teacher that Barato-san had called to the scene.

Since she hadn’t wanted to move me after my head injury and knowing she couldn’t carry me all by herself, she’d run to the teachers’ lounge to get help and rushed inside to tell them a boy had been injured.

You’re pretty level headed, Barato-san. If that had been me, I probably would’ve panicked and tried to carry the person myself.

Turns out, no one seemed to know who had dumped the dirty water out the window. It wasn’t like they had cameras set up around the campus, so it would be impossible to determine the culprit. At most, each class would probably receive a stern warning, and that’d be the end of that.

Well, it wasn’t like it mattered that much.

“Make sure you thank the little lady. She’s been keeping you company since you were brought here. Oh, to be young again,” said the nurse.

Hearing this, I felt my cheeks grow hot. For the time being, though, I chose not to humor them and continued changing in silence.

“Oh, your head injury wasn’t a big deal, but I did take care of that cut. Are you feeling okay? If the pain persists or if you start feeling dizzy, I recommend you go to the hospital immediately.”

When I finished changing, I found a thin square of gauze taped to my head. Other than that, I felt the same as usual, with no pain or nausea of any kind. I felt pretty alert too, so I probably didn’t need to go to the hospital. I’d just have to let my parents know about the accident.

“Young lady, you can come back in now. Your boyfriend’s finished changing. It’s sweet, really. Fancy getting all red at the sight of one bare chest.”

The nurse laughed warmly as she left the room. When Barato-san came back inside, her face was still a bit flushed.

No, I’m not her boyfriend. Hey, wait, she did confess to me before all this, so is that what I am now?

“Misumai, are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m fine. You fetched the teacher for me, huh? Thanks. That was a huge help.”

“Actually, I should be thanking you for protecting me.”

Protecting you? I just tried to shield you from a bucket and some dirty water, so it’s not that big of a deal. Okay, now I’m embarrassed.

A strange silence passed between us. *Um...what am I supposed to say at times like this? Come on, think. What did Baron-san say...?*

Wait a minute. Baron-san hadn’t given me advice on what to say if I got injured during the confession. Wasn’t there some way to spark up a conversation?!

As I was trying to remember the pointers from yesterday, Barato-san mumbled something.

“Your answer...”

“Huh?”

My answer?

“I confessed to you, you know? And, um, I was thinking that...I’d like to hear your response, but...do you remember anything?”

Barato-san looked away from me slightly and tilted her head, twirling her brown hair around her finger. Her cheeks were ever so lightly flushed. It seemed that both she and I would be turning red this entire day.

Oh, that’s right. I’d run toward her before I could respond, so I hadn’t really given her an answer. To me, there had only been one sure response, so I’d completely forgotten to tell her. I guess I must have been momentarily confused because I’d been knocked in the head.

Barato-san was fidgeting nervously.

Before then, she’d always seemed flashy and confident, but the girl before me was innocent and concerned. Could this be her true self?

Hm... Baron-san said to look straight into her eyes when responding. Her eyes, Yoshin. Look into her eyes. Okay, this is a little embarrassing. Be brave, me.

“Ah, right. Look, I don’t know why you like me, but if you’re okay with it, then I look forward to going out with you, Barato-san.”

With that, her anxious expression blossomed into a smile.

This must be what it means to smile like a flower. No, this flower is in full bloom. Maybe it’s just an act, but I am one lucky bastard for being able to see this smile.

If she keeps smiling at me like this, I’m going to get the wrong idea. This is a dare—don’t let your guard down.

She smiled brightly for quite some time before that smile turned cloudy. Then, with a small pout, she mumbled, “Nanami...”

“Excuse me?”

That was her name. I knew it already, but why would she mumble her own name? Without giving me a chance to wonder, the answer arrived to enlighten

me.

“We’re dating now, so call me Nanami. I’ll call you by your name too, Yoshin.”

Saying stuff like that with those puppy dog eyes would make any guy kneel to obey her. It was a sly move, to be sure, or rather, an act so cute it was almost illegal.

Truth be told, I was a little hesitant about calling a girl by her first name. I’d always thought the extroverts who could do things like that so easily were very different creatures from me. Nevertheless, I was about to say her name. My only worry was whether I could say it well.

“Okay. Yeah, right. It’s a pleasure, N-Nanami-san.”

I said it.

It took everything I had, but I said it somehow. And now that I had said it, I felt extremely embarrassed. I was itching from head to toe. Wow, was I really going to be able to get used to this?

Barato-san flashed me another beautiful smile. “Yes. It’s a pleasure, Yoshin.”

Jeez, when she looks at me that way, it makes me want to try harder. I’ll work on calling her by her name.

I held out my right hand. This wasn’t part of any of the advice Baron-san had given me, but something I’d decided to do myself. I was offering her a handshake.

Barato-san hesitated for a moment, but she then took my hand and shook it. This was the first time in my life that I’d touched a girl’s hand. It was soft, warm, and...very small.



“Well what do you know? You weren’t even boyfriend and girlfriend yet. Boy, I walked into something good this time. Ah, youth. Congrats, young man, young lady. Oh, but make sure to stick to a high school—appropriate relationship, won’t ya? If you’re gonna do it, use protection.”

Caught unawares by the nosy school nurse peeking in, we rushed to unlock our handshake.

Barato-san’s face had never been redder, and my face was turning red as well. What was this nurse saying, anyway?!

“Shouldn’t you be warning us against doing stuff like that?” I asked. “We’re only in high school.”

The nurse responded with a nonchalant look. “Quite the opposite, young man. It’s precisely *because* you’re in high school that you need proper sex education. You’re at that age when you want to do stuff you’re told not to do, right? If you do that, you’re gonna end up with a baby.”

It was extremely unlikely that things would get to that point when we would only be dating for a month, but I made sure to listen to the grown-up’s warning and stored it in my mind right next to the advice from Baron-san.

After that, the nurse checked on my condition and told me I was free to go, so I set off home together with my new girlfriend.

As we left school, Barato-san—I mean, *Nanami-san* didn’t say much. Since I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to talk about in times like these, the walk was awkwardly quiet.

Even when I did say something, Nanami-san seemed distracted and a little spaced out, as if she were feeling feverish. Was something wrong? I regretted not having asked Baron-san how to come up with things to talk about in times like these.

This was my first time ever walking back with a girl from school, so I couldn’t help but feel nervous. Thinking about it, I realized Nanami-san was probably nervous as well.

I’d been near silent so far, believing it would be better not to force her to talk

to me, but then Nanami-san spoke up as if she'd made up her mind about something.

"Hey, um, we should exchange contact info—like phone numbers or usernames or something. Do you have an app that you use?" she asked.

"Oh, right. I don't really use any, but I have some on my phone."

"You have them, but you don't use them?"

"I get news and free items for following official game accounts and that sort of thing."

Nanami-san hid her mouth with her phone and laughed as if I'd said something funny. I became instantly doubtful, thinking that she might make fun of me, but instead, her next words surprised me.

"Then I'm the first, huh? First contact, that is. That makes me happy."

What's with all these cute reactions? I was thrown for a loop.

Somewhat reassured, I exchanged contact info with her after asking her how to do it. A cute dolphin icon showed up in my app, next to the name "Nanami" in hiragana characters. I'd never seen such a cute icon displayed on my app before.

Still, I was surprised Nanami-san had asked to add me in the first place. I'd been sure she wouldn't share her contact details unless I'd been the one to mention it—that, or she would give me the runaround to avoid adding me at all.

To be perfectly honest, I'd thought she wouldn't be up for exchanging info at all since this whole thing was a dare, but... Was it my imagination, or did she seem oddly happy about this?

I don't get women at all. If this is an act, she could easily make a living as an actress.

After that, perhaps we'd broken the ice, since Nanami-san and I continued our conversation, albeit a little awkwardly. It didn't include any serious discussions, only us fumbling for what to say. I was, however, surprised to find I was enjoying the conversation.

But of course, time flies when you're having fun. Before we knew it, it was

time for us to go our separate ways. It seemed Nanami-san and I would be parting at the station, so even though we were walking home together, we wouldn't be together the whole way.

"See you tomorrow, Nanami-san," I said, and she smiled back.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Yoshin," came her response as she waved goodbye.

It was probably just my imagination, but she seemed a little sad, despite the smile.

After that, I headed home by myself. I'm not sure why—maybe it was that expression of hers—but I felt a strange sense of loneliness as I traveled home as usual.

Until yesterday, everything had been fine.

With my head swimming with surprise and confusion, I eventually arrived back home. From then on, it was the usual routine: my parents got back; we ate dinner; I changed and started up my game. It was business as usual. However, there was one thing that was different that day.

Baron: So, out with it. How'd the confession go? Come now, Canyon-kun, do share every detail with this middle-aged man.

These were Baron-san's first words once I got settled in.

I could tell just from the letters on the screen that Baron-san was all smiles and smirks behind that monitor of his. *I mean, come on, you knew all along I was going to say yes.*

Saying that, I had told him I'd report back in return for all his advice. Besides, he had already promised to keep helping me out, so the least I could do was update him.

Canyon: So, I accepted the confession as we'd planned. Though a lot ended up happening in the meantime.

Baron: A lot? Gosh, I'd love to hear specifics on the "a lot" part.

Ugh, of course you would.

For the time being, I wrote out the day's happenings in the chat as I got down to playing my game. I went into detail on the whole story—from when I saved her to when we walked home together.

The only detail I kept to myself was the fact that she'd seen me shirtless. I didn't want anyone to think I'd been doing anything weird. Plus, I had nothing to be ashamed of.

Hearing my report, Baron-san was beyond amused.

Baron: Well, that's high school for you! It must have been fate—who else saves a damsel in distress right in the middle of a confession? Are you destined to become a superhero or something?

No, I'm just your average introvert who likes gaming and working out. It was only by chance that I saved her.

Canyon: I had a real tough time when we walked back together. Like, at first we were completely silent. I didn't know what to talk about, which made me realize I should have asked you.

Baron: I don't really approve of you relying on me for things like that, but... Hmm, in those situations, rather than talking about yourself, maybe it's better to ask her about things she likes.

Canyon: But that's what I'm finding difficult...

Even if I had tried to ask more about her on the way to the station, Nanami-san had seemed awfully quiet. At first, she had seemed distracted no matter what I'd said. What could I have asked when she was in such a state? My only hobbies were gaming and working out, which were both topics that would have bored her. I'd tried my hardest to spit something out, but we'd eventually reached the train station. Even that fumbling conversation had been kind of fun, though.

Not knowing my state of mind, Baron-san continued his instruction.

Baron: Well, first you ask her about her hobbies. Then, once you've shown interest in learning more about her, you gradually expand on the topic of conversation. No matter what, though, don't make the mistake of only talking about yourself.

Ah, so I should ask about her hobbies... Come to think of it, I didn't really know anything about her aside from the whole dare thing. Perhaps I should take Baron-san's advice and start there.

Canyon: But really, Baron-san, you sure know a lot about this stuff. You must've been really popular when you were in school.

Baron: Oh, no. My wisdom is all straight from the internet. And I was in no way popular back then. Nowadays, as long as you look things up, the information's right at your fingertips. Isn't that convenient?

Forget that I was impressed. You were just googling it this whole time.

Saying that, it was true that the internet was overflowing with all kinds of information. Perhaps I should start looking things up too?

Peach: There's no way this'll go well, Canyon-san. You should break up with her before you get hurt.

Peach-san was back, but from the message she'd sent, you could feel her resentment from the screen. All this opposition when it came to Nanami-san must have stemmed from her worry for me.

While I appreciated her concern, I just couldn't bring myself to be the one to break up with Nanami-san at this point. Not only for her, but for me too. Becoming known as the guy who broke the heart of the angelic Nanami-san was a prospect too scary to think about.

Canyon: Well, I've already gotten hurt by getting my head injured, so now I'd say I'm in the clear.

Peach: Huh? You were injured?

Peach-san was worried, despite my joke, so I added my explanation of how I'd been cut by a bucket and how Nanami-san had helped get me to the nurse's office.

Baron: Canyon-kun, you risked your life to save her? I totally missed that. Are you all right? If your head took the brunt of it, you should probably get yourself to the hospital.

Peach: No way... Are you okay?

Baron-san and Peach-san were worried for me in their own ways. I hadn't included the injury in my previous explanation, so Baron-san seemed a bit flustered. I wasn't feeling out of it and wasn't in pain anymore, so I told them I was okay, but they both reiterated that I should go to the hospital if I felt at all off.

Hmm... I think I'm fine, but now that they mention it, I am getting a little anxious. Maybe I should talk to my parents later.

When I mentioned that to Baron-san and Peach-san, they reluctantly agreed. Really, I was grateful that they worried about me so much.

Baron: Well then, now that you've accepted the confession and you're going out with her, shall we set the goal for this week?

Canyon: Goal?

Baron-san was acting strange again. Just as I was asking myself what on earth he was talking about, he posted the answer in the chat.

Baron: Let's aim to have you hold hands with her by the end of the week. You're going out, so there's nothing strange about doing that. Oh, but don't force her, okay? You have to get her to say that she wants to hold hands with you.

Holding hands with a girl... That was an unexpectedly high hurdle. I'd never done such a thing in my life. Jeez...

Canyon: Today we shook hands, so maybe that counts.

Baron: No chance. Interlocking fingers might be too big of a hurdle, so let's start with holding hands to and from school.

I guess that didn't count, huh?

Still, the presented hurdle was already 120 percent too high. Holding hands to and from school was probably a situation that lots of guys could only dream of being in, but how was a guy like me supposed to earn that level of affection?

I didn't have real-life friends who could teach me how to get girls to like me. It wasn't even possible to quantify the difficulty of courtship in the real world, and even if you could, those stats weren't visible. How many points did I need to earn the right to hold hands with her?

I didn't have the slightest clue what to do.

Baron: You're overthinking it. Let's see... Let's make the deadline this Friday. Until then, you're going to work to get her to like you. I'll leave the method up to you.

Canyon: Friday? Today's Tuesday, so that's three days. Wait, not counting today, it's only two days. Isn't that too unreasonable?

Besides, you have to tell me how I'm supposed to do it! Please don't leave it up to me!

Just as I was about to type that in the chat, I received a well-timed message from Nanami-san. We had exchanged contact info, but thinking I wouldn't get a message from her on the very first day, I was completely unprepared and opened the message by accident.

When I saw what she'd sent me, my eyes widened.

Nanami: We're going out now, so let's walk to school together starting tomorrow. How does meeting at the train station at 7:30 sound?

The second I opened it, the message was marked as read. If I'd just waited, I would have been able to ask for advice first. Panicking, I took my distress straight to Baron-san.

Canyon: Baron-san, we have a problem! I just got a message from her saying we should walk to school together tomorrow! What should I do?!

Baron: Why's that a problem? Of course that's a yes! Hurry up and respond! But don't be curt about it; make it a text where you convey that you're looking forward to it! Go on, hurry!

Baron-san's response was remarkably quick.

A text that conveys that I'm looking forward to it? What kind of a message is that?! I'm not a writer, dammit. How am I supposed to convey all that in a text?!

With the text still marked as read, I had to take a moment to craft my response. *What if she thinks I'm ignoring her?*

No, no. I shouldn't be worrying myself like that! If I can't think of anything, I'll have to get straight to the point! Let's do this!

Yoshin: I'd be happy to walk with you to school, Nanami-san. 7:30's fine by me. I'm looking forward to it.

My response felt extremely stiff, but that was the best I could do. I wasn't suave enough to write anything cleverer, but it contained my honest feelings.

As I sat there, anxious about what she'd think, my message was immediately marked as read. Nanami-san's response came just as quickly.

Nanami: I'm looking forward to it too.

Her response was just that single, simple sentence, but what could I say? I couldn't keep myself from smiling. It was the first time ever a girl had told me that she was looking forward to something we had planned together. Of course I couldn't help smiling.

Canyon: Baron-san, we'll be meeting at 7:30 tomorrow at the station. What should I do?

Baron: I'd like you to think for yourself a bit more, but... Well, let's see. If you're meeting her at 7:30, you'd better leave the house early so that you can be at the meeting place by 7:00.

Wasn't that a little too early? As if responding to my question, Baron-san continued.

Baron: Arriving a little early is the way to go. It's much better than being late. Being late is top on the list of things you shouldn't do. Even if you didn't mean it that way, it would make it seem like you're not taking the other person seriously. Besides...

Canyon: Besides...?

Baron-san paused dramatically before continuing.

Baron: You want to see your lovely girlfriend as soon as possible, don't you?

Lovely girlfriend... I knew he was teasing me, but I could feel my face getting hot. Hearing it from someone else made me realize that Nanami-san really *was* my girlfriend, even if it was just for one month. I couldn't help smiling at the thought of it.

Baron: Look, Canyon-kun, you need to get her to like you from here on out. So, more than anything, you have to put her first. Don't worry about our game events. We'll hold your spot on the team for now so you can focus on developing your relationship with your girlfriend.

Until now, I'd prioritized my games over everything. Would I really be able to change my priorities so suddenly? I wanted to continue playing since we were still in the middle of a campaign, not to mention that I didn't want to cause problems for my team by pulling out. I was grateful to Baron-san, but that didn't mean I wasn't remorseful.

Baron: In an ideal world, your girlfriend would share in your hobbies so that you could play games together, but that's advice for another day. For now, you have to get to know her. Oh, I'm sure you'll be fine. They say the one who falls in love falls at the other's feet. If she does fall for you, I'm sure she'll want to play with you.

That's true. If Nanami-san was willing to join in, I bet we'd have loads of fun. I tried to picture the scene for a moment, but my poor imagination couldn't quite conjure the image.

Regardless, I decided it was best to leave the house a little earlier than usual, just as Baron-san had advised.

Canyon: I understand. I'll head out early tomorrow. That means I'm off to bed for the night. See ya tomorrow.

Baron: Sure thing. Good night, buddy. Best of luck.

Peach: Be careful, Canyon-san.

Judging from the last message, Peach-san was still worried about me. I couldn't thank Baron-san or Peach-san enough—not that I could think of a good way to thank them.

Anyway, I tried sending them my thankful vibes and headed to bed with thoughts filled with Nanami-san, whom I'd be meeting before school tomorrow. But...

“Tomorrow, I'm meeting up with Nanami-san... We'll be going to school together... I'll be going to school with my girlfriend... With my girlfriend... With Nanami-san... Nanami-san is my girlfriend...”

Lying in bed, I was unable to grasp the fact of the matter. I'd turned out my lights but kept rereading the messages I'd received on my phone.

In the end, I wasn't able to fall asleep.

Wow, I'm definitely going to be sleep-deprived tomorrow.

Being so strangely excited, it took me nearly an hour longer to fall asleep than usual, prompting me to realize just how simpleminded I was.

Interlude: Her Feelings

That day, I, Nanami Barato, confessed to a boy for the very first time. A boy in my class who was quiet and gentle. A boy who didn't stand out. A boy I'd never really spoken to before, whom I didn't even know that well. But the boy I confessed to, Yoshin Misumai, was undoubtedly a kind boy.

As long as the boy had been someone gentle, my confession could have been to anyone. When I say it like that, I sound like a random street attacker, but I was sure I must have seemed that way to him. After all, I hadn't confessed because I liked him.

I'd confessed to him on a dare.

That's right, a dare—a challenge where I was supposed to tell him I liked him and then go out with him for a month. It was the punishment I had to face for losing a game with my friends.

A dare like this was the very worst act of toying with someone else's feelings. Somehow, though, I had ultimately decided to go through with it. I realize again this was the lowest of decisions.

Hear me out, but this hadn't been my idea in the first place. My friends, Hatsumi Otofuke and Ayumi Kamoenai, were the ones who'd dared me to do it. I'd been reluctant at first, but in the end...I'd accepted the dare. If I think about it that way, I guess there was no point in making excuses. In the moment that I'd told them I'd do it, I had become just as guilty.

You see, I knew I looked confident because of the way I dressed, and my clothes tended to be somewhat revealing, but for various reasons, I had a hard time talking to guys. My friends had been the ones to help me build up my appearance like a wall to protect my heart.

In the end, it was a fragile barrier that wasn't much of a wall at all, but when I dressed like that and hung out with the two of them, I was able to interact with guys fairly normally. I think I'd even managed to become friends with a few of

them.

But my appearance wasn't enough for me to do that without them. I still couldn't be alone with a guy. At least, not before that day. And precisely for that reason, my two friends were worried about me.

It was fine for now, but I planned to go to college one day. Hatsumi wanted to be a cosmetologist and Ayumi a designer, so they were both studying hard, their hearts set on vocational schools.

The three of us might have seemed brainless because of our looks, but our grades weren't even that bad. We were working just as hard as anyone else to achieve our dreams.

But with us being on such different paths, the time would eventually come when my path would deviate from theirs. They were worried I'd go off to college and get tangled up with some weird guy while they weren't there looking out for me. In fact, Hatsumi and Ayumi were more worried about me than my own parents and were sure to constantly remind me not to get strung along by some strange guy.

That was probably why they'd suggested a dare this time around—so that I could get just a little bit more used to guys and keep myself safe in the future.

My friends had probably chosen Yoshin-kun because he seemed like the safest option. I'd never spoken to him personally, but it was true he was quiet and always alone. That considered, they weren't the only ones who believed he was harmless.

And so, after a bit of a pep talk from my friends, I had plucked up the courage to confess to him.

And I'd done it that very same day.

Even though I knew how bad this was, I'd confessed to him out of my own selfishness. I truly was the worst.

But dare or not, this was still my first confession. I'd been confessed to before, but never the other way around. The night before, I'd lain there unable to sleep, mumbling quietly to myself as my nerves tormented me.

“Tomorrow... Tomorrow, I have to confess...”

When the time had finally come, however, it wasn't my own nervousness that surprised me, but Yoshin-kun himself.

So many guys had confessed to me up till that point—the captain of the basketball team who couldn't keep his eyes off my chest, that guy with a bad-boy complex who kept staring at my legs, that serious-looking guy with glasses who kept eyeing my bare arms... Not a single one had been looking at my face during their confession. And every single one had looked at me as if they'd been expecting something.

But Yoshin-kun was different.

He had looked into my eyes and only my eyes—not at any other part of my body. He had looked me in the eyes with seriousness. He'd done it for my sake.

Faced with a reaction so different and so unexpected, I felt something other than nervousness. And the moment I finished confessing with all of my courage—courage? Come on, girl, this was only a dare!—Yoshin-kun had come running toward me.

In the blink of an eye, he had pushed me to the ground and covered my body with his.

So shocked by his behavior—*Huh?! Am I being attacked?!*—I'd simply lain there unable to do anything. And at that moment, I couldn't help but feel...disappointed.

Was he just the same as all the other guys before him, or maybe even worse?

All of a sudden, I'd become fearful that this guy would assault me. I'd screamed, but my legs had refused to move. All I could do was close my eyes and scream, unable to put up any meaningful resistance. But, I'd quickly realized how wrong my perceptions had been.

As I'd fallen to the ground, the sound of water splashing and the thud of a hard object rang in my ears, which was followed by a shock that reverberated through his body into mine.

When I had opened my eyes in fear, wondering what had happened, I'd been

met by the sight of Yoshin-kun, soaking wet and bleeding from the head.

His blood had dripped down onto my cheek...and he'd smiled at me.

"Are you okay? Barato-san...? Are you hurt?"

Those very first words, spoken while he was sopping wet and injured, had expressed genuine concern for me. And immediately after that, he'd collapsed.

Not knowing what was happening, I was overwhelmed with confusion. But I soon realized he'd acted that way to protect me and felt ashamed for my earlier disappointment. I almost panicked, thinking he'd died because of me, but by some miracle, he was still breathing.

Without another thought, I got to my feet and ran for help. There was no way I could carry him by myself.

As I ran, my breathing became heavier and my heart beat faster, but I couldn't tell if my quickened pulse was because I was running or because of Yoshin-kun.

When I finally reached the staff room, I called for a teacher and asked them to carry him to the infirmary. My heart kept pounding and my chest felt tight as I gazed at his unopening eyes.

The school nurse freed Yoshin-kun from his wet clothes, treated him swiftly, and laid him down on a bed. I could have cried when they told me that he was going to be all right.

Then, after all that had happened, he sat up, instantly striking me dumb. After all, Yoshin-kun was still shirtless! More than that, though, his physique was what caught me off guard. I'd thought he was quiet and scrawny, but that wasn't the case at all. In fact, he had a nicer body than I could have ever imagined. It was then that it finally hit me that he really *was* a boy, but the apprehension I usually felt about them...wasn't an issue at all.

And I was to soon learn that, more than any other guy I'd met before, this one was gentlemanly and kind.

When he woke up and accepted my confession, I was overcome with joy and guilt. More than that, though, I was surprised at myself for feeling so happy that

he'd said yes.

Overcome with this sense of happiness, I suggested we call each other by our first names. Until then, I'd disliked the idea of a guy calling me Nanami. Them doing so had always seemed so uncomfortably intimate, but I couldn't help wanting to hear it from Yoshin-kun.

But that was all I could do. Beyond that, I couldn't say anything more to him.

I didn't know whether it was from my growing sense of guilt or from feeling nervous about walking with him, but I couldn't find the words to talk to him on our way home together. Was he bored? I felt really bad about it.

At the very end, when we were exchanging contact info, we said a word or two, though it was kind of awkward. But even that brief exchange made me so happy, I was on cloud nine.

Some time later, I got back home whilst still in a daze. As I flopped on my bed, my thoughts suddenly hit me.

"He was so cool... Yoshin-kun..."

Wait, why was I so flustered? Why was I talking to myself? Did I even have the right to do that?

I flailed around on my bed, my mind filled with Yoshin-kun—Yoshin-kun, my boyfriend. In my heart, I didn't feel any discomfort about the thought of going out with a boy.

That's right, starting tomorrow, I was going to act like Yoshin-kun's girlfrie—No, I was going to act like *Yoshin's* girlfriend. I couldn't afford to commit any more blunders, or so I told myself with gusto.

And in that moment, I suddenly caught myself.

What was I getting so worked up for? This was all just a dare—one measly month of a relationship. But why, if that was the case, had I felt so sad when he'd said goodbye?

I shook my head to dispel the niggling thoughts and took a moment to glance at my phone. It had been pinging with nonstop notifications since I'd got back, so it had to be my friends checking up on me.

As expected, I found a stream of rapid-fire messages that I began to read through one by one.

Hatsumi: Sooo, how was it? Did he say yes?!

Ayumi: I'm sure it went fine, right? But you've still gotta tell us how it turned out!

I looked at the messages and smiled bitterly, then sent them a simple response.

Nanami: It went well. A lot happened, so I'll spill how it went tomorrow. I'm gonna go to sleep now, though. Night.

With my reply sent, I left the conversation. They messaged me a few more times afterward, but the texts soon stopped, so they must have thought I'd fallen asleep.

After that, I took a deep breath and tapped Yoshin's icon in the messaging app. Seeing the name of the first boy I'd ever exchanged contact info with, I felt giddy.

Was the character in his icon from some kind of anime? It was a female character with her hair in stylish braids. Did he like girls that looked like this?

I twirled the ends of my hair around my fingertips. I didn't usually do anything fancy with it—I'd just tie it back or curl it into subtle waves—but that was because I had no one to show it off to. It seemed way too much of an effort otherwise. Sure, I knew how to do hairstyles like the one in Yoshin's profile picture, but I'd never really tried it out on myself before.

"Maybe I should try braiding it..." I mumbled to myself.

Unable to suppress my racing heartbeat, I impulsively sent him a message.

Nanami: We're going out now, so let's walk to school together starting tomorrow. How does meeting at the train station at 7:30 sound?

Did it not sound friendly enough?

The second I thought that, the message was marked as read. I was happy he'd looked at my message so quickly, but at the same time, I was anxious because he wasn't replying.

Had I said something weird? Was he ignoring my text? Or was he just flustered because he didn't know how to talk to a girl? If he really was flustered, I felt we had something in common.

Until a reply came, I waited for what felt like a very long time, even though it probably wasn't that long at all.

Then it finally came.

Yoshin: I'd be happy to walk with you to school, Nanami-san. 7:30's fine by me. I'm looking forward to it.

I jumped for joy just by seeing him say he'd be happy, and the bed I was lying on creaked.

Why was he being so polite, though? I wondered for a moment before finally deciding that he must be unfamiliar with the situation. The more I thought about it, the more I found it to be adorable.

Wait, adorable? What was I even thinking? I didn't know anything about this guy!

I wasn't sure if these feelings were from what people called the suspension bridge effect—feeling more attracted to someone due to a dangerous situation—or if I really was beginning to like him. But if I *was* beginning to like him, I had to be the easiest girl in the world! Perhaps my friends were right to be worried about me...

No, no. I wasn't easy. Yoshin was just a trial boyfriend—that's all. I wasn't easy, okay?! These heart palpitations were clearly a result of the suspension bridge effect!

I shook my head in denial, all while a mix of bewilderment, guilt, and a sliver of happiness swirled within me.

“But yeah, even though it is just an act, I’m still his girlfriend, so feeling like this must be allowed.”

Just as I’d told my friends, I decided to turn in early for the night. Then, with determination in my heart, I slid into bed. Tomorrow, I had to wake up earlier than usual.

“Tomorrow, I’m meeting up with Yoshin... We’ll be going to school together... I’ll be going to school with my boyfriend... With my boyfriend... With Yoshin... Yoshin is my boyfriend...”

When I thought about it that way, I was suddenly struck by embarrassment. My heart pounding, I forced myself to close my eyes.

Even though I was nervous, my fatigue soon overcame me. Slowly but surely, I sank into a deep sleep.

I sunk and sunk...until I was met with a dream.

In my dreams, a shirtless Yoshin kept appearing, and I woke up every time. This marked yet another night of restless sleep. However, I still managed to wake up in time to meet him, which was all thanks to the shirtless Yoshin—or so I convinced myself.

Chapter 2: Dating on a Dare?

That morning, I was more sleep-deprived than usual. I tended to be somewhat sleep-deprived on a normal day, but today, I'd lost sleep for a different reason.

Today was the day I would meet up with a girl for the very first time. It wasn't my fault *that* had kept me from sleeping. Even if she had only asked me out on a dare, it was still my very first meetup with my girlfriend. I couldn't help feeling like I was walking on air.

Baron-san had told me to get to the meeting place by seven, but actually, I was trying to get there even earlier than that. After my sleepless night, I'd ended up getting out of bed at the crack of dawn, making me early enough to catch the first train at 6:30 or so. It was so much earlier than usual that just looking at the time made me yawn.

I'd left the house after telling my mother that I had some things to take care of at school—telling her I was meeting up with a girl would have been way too embarrassing!

At this rate, I was going to end up at our meeting spot an hour earlier than planned. Still, it was a lot better than being late, and I could just kill time by playing one of my games. Or at least that's what I'd told myself before I was thrown off by an unexpected situation.

She—Nanami-san—was already there at the meeting spot before me, despite me arriving a whole hour earlier than planned. Even just standing there alone, she seemed impossibly beautiful. There weren't that many people around yet, but all the men stole glances at her as they passed.

Wait, had I gotten the time wrong? I thought I'd gotten up really early, but was I actually late? No, wait, my phone said 6:30, and she asked me to meet her at 7:30. I wasn't wrong, and space-time hadn't warped... The time was accurate.

Huh? Why is she here so early?

I was confused by the situation, but I didn't want to keep her waiting. Even Baron-san had told me being late makes you seem like you're not taking the other person seriously. Granted, I wasn't late by any means, but since I'd already found her, I couldn't keep her waiting.

Feeling flustered at finding her there, I rushed to her side.

When she saw me, she shrank back for a moment as if afraid of the figure approaching her, but when she realized that it was me, she looked relieved and broke into a smile.

"Hey, N-Nanami-san. Sorry if I kept you waiting. I thought we were meeting at 7:30, but...did I totally have that wrong?"

I wasn't used to calling such a pretty girl by her first name, but I had somehow managed to spit it out, albeit a little awkwardly. She continued smiling at me as she shook her head.

"No, you had it right. I just got here a little early, is all. Good morning, Yoshin."

"Oh, um... Good morning, Nanami-san."

At least I'd gotten the time right. Nanami-san had told me she'd arrived a little early, but wasn't this a bit *too* early?

She greeted me with a smile, and I greeted her back. Never in a million years had I dreamed I'd one day meet up with my girlfriend before school.

She was wearing her usual school uniform with the shortened skirt, but she was carrying a slightly larger shoulder bag than the one she'd been carrying yesterday. At least, I thought I remembered her carrying a smaller bag yesterday, but maybe she liked to change things up according to her mood.

This girl *had* confessed to me yesterday, right? Even if it was a dare. Even after the night I'd spent mulling it over, when I looked at her, I couldn't quite believe it. *This isn't a dream, is it?*

"Fancy seeing you here so early. I mean, I know I'm early too, but I had something I had to do, so..."

I immediately snapped back to reality. *What should I do? Should I tell her the truth? I guess there's no point making up an excuse.*

“Oh, sorry. It was my first time meeting up with a girl, so I was nervous and couldn’t really sleep. I got here early, but I’m glad I didn’t have to keep you waiting.”

“Oh, is that it? Well, you don’t have to worry about that. I guess we’re getting to spend a little more time together because of it, so I’m glad.”

Despite her carefree manner, she was beaming from ear to ear. That smile of hers really confused me—it was in complete contrast with her casual tone. I mean, I was happy to see her too, but wouldn’t she want to spend less time with the guy she’d only been dared to date?

I don’t understand women, I thought as I looked her over once more.

Her large brown eyes grew round as she smiled, giving a soft impression. Each time she blinked her double lids, they gave the illusion of stars twinkling around the outside. She had a small mole under one of her eyes, which somehow looked rather sexy. There was no doubt in my mind that she was truly a beautiful girl.

Her long, sleek hair looked black at first glance, but in the right light, it glinted the same color as her eyes. It was only after this casual observation that I noticed her hairstyle was different from yesterday. Today, her long hair had braids in it.

Ah, that’s right—yesterday her hair had been flowing and straight, but today, she was sporting braids. I had a strange feeling I’d seen the look somewhere before, but it suited her and was pretty.

Come to think of it, Baron-san had said something about hair...

Baron: Listen up, Canyon-kun. If there’s even a slight change to her, make sure to compliment it. If your girlfriend really is the popular type, I’m sure she puts in a lot of effort. So rather than telling her she’s pretty, compliment the one thing she’s changed. If her hairstyle changes, say that it suits her, and so on and so forth.

Canyon: Is that also straight from the internet?

Baron: Naturally. In fact, I’m the type who gets yelled at because I don’t notice anything. It’s not the sort of advice you can use at work anyway, since if I get it wrong, it becomes sexual harassment. We better save it for your girlfriend, buddy.

Right, even if his advice had been straight from the internet, compliments were important. There was no way I could compliment her change of bags, so I should at least compliment her hairstyle.

Whether this would increase my favorability with her was yet to be seen, but... *No, wait, that doesn't matter. I should just give her a genuine compliment. There isn't anyone who isn't happy when they're complimented. Besides, I really do think she looks pretty. I should just tell it like it is.*

"I noticed you braided your hair today, Nanami-san. They, um... They look good on you, and, um...they look pr...pre...suitable."

Right. That was a fail.

The word "pretty" presented far too high of a hurdle, and I just couldn't spit it out. I'd managed to tell her they suited her, but that was about my limit. Why was I such a loser?

But it couldn't be helped. I mean, what's up with the minds of people who can go around calling girls pretty like it's nothing? I had better ask Baron-san when I got home later.

"D-Do they look okay? Oh, good! I'm glad. I'm so relieved. I was trying out this hairstyle for you."

"Yeah, it suits you— Huh? For me?"

"That's right. I mean, there's a girl with this hairstyle on your app icon, so I thought you'd like this sort of look."

I felt a chill run down my spine.

Shoot! I'd exchanged contact info with her, but I'd left my icon as a girl! Not only that, but it was a character from a game I liked! Was it sheer dumb luck that Nanami-san hadn't noticed the revealing outfit the character was wearing?

I hadn't cared about the icon before now because I didn't have many contacts in the first place. If I'd known it was gonna turn out like this, I would have chosen somewhere safer to add her!

"Hey, now. Don't go looking all sad. Who cares about an anime icon? It's not that rare these days, is it? Even I go to watch anime movies and things like that.

If you like it, what's the big deal?"

There was an angel before me. A gyaru angel.

She must have decided to copy the hairstyle to show me her understanding. I'd gotten ahead of myself in my desperation, when she hadn't even cared in the first place. What a sweet girl.

"You like this hairstyle, right? Do you think it's cute?" she asked, pinching a braid as she tilted her head.

Was I really going to hesitate saying a simple word to a girl who'd gone through all that trouble for me? No, I couldn't do that. I may have been an introvert, but I still had my pride to uphold. I had to return courtesy with courtesy.

I needed courage, but if I couldn't muster it up now, when would I ever be able to? *That's right, Yoshin, just pretend this is an in-game chat. If it were, I'd write this about a character with no hesitation. Just think of this as an extension of that chat... Go on, say it, Yoshin!*

"Y-Yeah. It's cute, Nanami-san. That hairstyle suits you, and it's really pretty."

I said it! I actually said it! I said the words that bested me earlier! In my head, I was pumping my fist.

But this test of courage has exhausted me greatly. I feel like I've used up a whole day's worth of stamina and I must make haste to use a healing item to restore it... No, wait. This isn't a game; get your head out of the clouds, Yoshin.

When I returned, I was staring right at Nanami-san, who was blushing as she flashed me that flowerlike smile that she'd given me yesterday.

Maybe she was happy, since she seemed a little bit bashful.

Wow, I don't even need a healing item. Just seeing her radiant smile has refilled my stamina to the max.

But, since hanging around here was pointless, we decided to head off to school together. As I was standing beside her, about to set off, Nanami-san extended her right hand toward me.

"Hnnh...!" she said.

“Huh?” I said in return.

I could understand neither the meaning of her action nor the accompanying verbalization. *Oh, wait. She’s asking me to pay her girlfriend fee?*

Yeah, that must be it. She’s done so much for me, of course there’d be a charge for it. I shouldn’t expect that to be free to play. I wonder if the price is the same as doing a ten-pull on a gacha game...

No wait, stop confusing this with an online game. Besides, I really only play free-to-play games.

I caught myself as I was rummaging around for my wallet, then glanced up to look Nanami-san in the eyes. When our gazes met, her cheeks flushed slightly, and she opened her mouth to speak.

“We’re going out now, so let’s hold hands on the way to school. Or do you not want to?”

“I want to.”

That was a quick answer. What kind of guy would say no to that?

Aware that she was watching me with her head slightly tilted, I hurried to grasp her right hand with my right one.

Ah, yeah... This would be a handshake—the thing we did yesterday. I moved too fast. Come on, get yourself together.

Thankfully, she seemed to find my blunder funny, because she instantly burst into laughter. “Aha ha ha! This is the same as yesterday’s handshake. I don’t think we can walk to school while shaking hands.”

“Yeah, you’re right... Um, how about like this? It’s my first time holding hands with a girl, so I don’t really know how to go about it.”

I repositioned myself to hold her hand with my left one this time. Just like yesterday, her hand was very soft and small. It felt slightly colder today, but perhaps that was because she’d been waiting for me so early.

“This is kind of embarrassing, huh?” she said. Her cheeks were flushed as she smiled at me. At least I knew that that wasn’t just from the morning chill.

At that moment, it finally dawned on me. I was holding hands with a girl! Just like that, my cheeks were as red as hers and my mind raced away in a panic.

What do I do, Baron-san? I've already met my goal for the week!

I could only report in my head to Baron-san, instigator of my weekly goal. At this point, I still didn't know what my next goal would be.

We walked hand in hand, got on the train, got off the train, and headed to school. It was the same path I always took, but holding hands with Nanami-san made me look at everything from a different perspective.

Truth be told, I was oblivious to what it meant to hold hands with her on the way to school. Well, no. I knew, but I was so worked up that I'd totally forgotten about it.

Nanami-san had rejected all sorts of good-looking guys. She was so attractive that they just kept confessing to her. The sight of a girl like her holding hands with an introvert like me, who didn't even stand out at all, exposed us to all kinds of stares, whether they be from curiosity, shock, jealousy, or hatred.

If only I'd switched on my brain, I would've remembered, but I couldn't let go of her hand now.

At least it was still early enough that there weren't many other students around. But even then, some of them were watching us closely. Thankfully, no one came up to talk to us, but those who knew Nanami-san were whispering to each other.

To be honest, I didn't feel all that good about it, but I decided it couldn't be helped. I glanced over at Nanami-san to see how she was faring, and as luck would have it, she seemed to be having fun. As expected of Nanami-san...

"I guess there'll be rumors about us, huh?"

Taking the opportunity to tease me, she flashed me a pristine smile. Her pearly whites shone as clearly as they would in a movie. And totally unlike the day before, she kept talking to me the whole way.

"What do you do for fun?"

"How do you spend your weekends?"

“Have you dated anyone else before?”

Topic after topic flew at me as we walked, like I was being bombarded by a journalist firing questions from a machine gun.

I knew Baron-san had told me to be the one asking *her* questions, but that had all gone out the window. Still, I made up my mind that I couldn't possibly follow his advice in this situation and did my best to ramble off the requested information about myself.

Nanami-san was an exceptional conversationalist. Every question she asked led on to the next. When she asked me about my hobbies and I told her I liked to play video games, she immediately deduced my icon character was from a game. She followed up by asking me whether I played that game on weekends too, admitting that she'd never really played any games before herself.

I don't know how to describe it properly, but she had the extraordinary ability to string a conversation together by following up one question with the next. Perhaps this was what it truly meant to be a good listener... Alas, I was nothing like her.

As a result of her skills, I ended up talking only about myself. It would be a shame if she thought that I was boring. At the very least, she seemed to be enjoying herself, so I'd like to think I'd made the right decision.

Still, just thinking about the rumors that would start up about us, I felt immediately remorseful.

“Yeah, and there'll be rumors about you going out with someone like me. I feel really bad for you, Nanami-san.”

My comment was self-deprecating, but I couldn't help voicing it aloud. But the moment I did, she started pouting.

“What in the world? That's not the reaction I wanted, you know? We're going out, so it's totally fine.”

I was overcome by an urge to poke her puffed-out cheeks.

What did she want me to say? Predicting that might be difficult to grasp until I get to know her a bit better...

As I mulled over the correct response, Nanami-san continued. “From now on, I don’t want to hear you say things like ‘someone like me.’ You’re my boyfriend, now, and you saved me yesterday. You were the coolest. With that in mind, can we make this a relationship on an equal footing?”

Isn’t this relationship based on a dare, though?

Oh, I get it. An equal footing. That’s her ideal kind of relationship. She’s simulating that with me. I see. I understand. I understand everything. Yes, I hadn’t made a mistake, even though I was about to.

“Yeah, I understand. I’m sorry, Nanami-san.”

She smiled back at me, but that smile had clouded over a little bit. Unlike her dazzling, flowerlike smile from before, this one was tinged with sadness.

“I’m sorry too.”

So why was she apologizing? Was it an apology for potential rumors, or was it an apology for only dating me because of a dare?

If I told her I knew her secret, how would her expression change then? I was kind of curious to find out, but I firmly resisted the temptation to tell her. Instead, I poked her cheek with my index finger. That I couldn’t resist.



She looked at me with rounded eyes in response to my sudden action. I'd meant it as a joke, but I was just as startled by her surprise.

"Wh-Wh... Wha... What?!" she stammered.

"Oh, sorry. It's just that you started apologizing even though you'd just said you wanted a relationship on an equal footing. Did that bother you? Sorry."

"N-No, I was just k-kind of surprised. Yeah, surprised, that's it..."

That surprised face of hers was now beet red, and she didn't seem to know where to look. Apparently, I'd caught her off guard... Whoops.

She remained silent for a few more minutes until we eventually arrived at school. It had all happened so fast.

We finally let go of each other's hand so that we could change from our regular shoes into our inside ones. Since we'd arrived, I thought this was where the moment would end, but once we had our shoes on, she extended her hand again.

You're suggesting we even hold hands during the short walk to the classroom? Really?

"Isn't it a little embarrassing?" I asked.

"Who cares? It's morning, so it's not like there are many people around. Just a little bit longer."

In defeat, I gave up and accepted her hand.

The classroom was just as sparsely populated as the hallway, but the moment we entered, hushed voices filled the room. The only ones to remain silent were Nanami-san's two friends...who were here awfully early again, weren't they?

As the classroom stirred to life, the two of them walked up to us with smiles on their faces. Um, what were their names again?

"Oho, Nanami, that's pretty bold," said the friend with long, straight hair totally different from Nanami-san's soft, fluffy hair. "I never thought I'd see *you* holding hands with someone."

"Aha, hey, Hatsumi. Yeah, I guess..." Nanami-san responded.

Though Hatsumi-san seemed surprised at Nanami-san's behavior, her tone was gentle and gave away a sense of relief.

Nanami-san was smiling back at her shyly.

Hatsumi-san was dressed like a gyaru too, but a much different type from Nanami-san. Though her long black hair matched her dark eyes, it was littered with streaks of red. Her eyes were striking, and she had a kind of aggressive beauty that reminded me of a carnivorous beast stalking its prey.

Naturally, her skirt was short, and her shirt was unbuttoned at the chest, but the parts of her body that the shirt exposed seemed...very firm. She had her hands on her hips and was giving off formidable woman vibes.

"Congrats, Nanami!" the other friend exclaimed.

"Thanks, Ayumi," Nanami-san replied.

The girl with short hair and a laid-back smile—Ayumi-san, I think it was—clapped her hands like an innocent child.

"Congrats, Yoshin!" she said, flashing me a bright smile as she continued clapping.

Her slightly wavy, light-brown hair came to just above her shoulders. She was very petite, but the ampleness of her chest stood out on a girl of such short stature. A light chain dangled around her neck, but the pendant was caught in her cleavage, tucked away where the eye couldn't see. Only the slightest glint of what seemed to be a locket was peeking out.

Ayumi-san struck me as someone inherently cutesy, with her laid-back smile and down-turned eyes. If someone told me she was in a grade below, I probably would have believed them. With all three girls lined up, they made for quite the spectacle. They were three very different types of people, but they all looked as though they'd stepped out of a magazine.

Nevertheless, they were reacting like they hadn't at all been the ones to suggest the dare. I'd expected more laughing and teasing from them. On the contrary, though, their congratulations seemed to be genuine. If these smiles really were part of an act, I would lose all faith in women.

“Yoshin, can we borrow your girlfriend for a bit? We wanted to have some girl talk with Nanami. Oh, actually, do you want to join us too?”

“No, that’s all right. I wouldn’t want to intrude. I’ll see you later then, Nanami-san,” I said.

As I let go of her hand, I glimpsed a brief look of disappointment, but she was quickly whisked out of the classroom by her friends.

Well, they were going to talk about the dare, so it’d be difficult for them to do that with me listening in. The invitation had only been offered in anticipation of my refusal.

With Nanami-san gone, I looked down at my empty hand, where the warmth of her own seemed to linger. Still immersed in the moment, I opened and closed it as if to hold on.

“I wonder if this is what it means to go out with someone who’s out of your league...”

For the time being, though, I took a seat at my desk, put down my bag, and... *Well, what should I do now?*

I glanced around the noisy room.

I could already tell that the few people who’d been shooting us looks earlier were itching to start asking questions. It wouldn’t be long before they surrounded me.

I knew what they’d want to ask. I mean, what else would they ask about? If only I could figure out how to answer those questions... Could I even survive until Nanami-san came back? Maybe that was the bigger issue here.

Then the first person rose and walked to my seat...and then a second came...and then, one after another, classmates whose names and faces I couldn’t match up in my head crowded around me, loosing question after question at me like a stream of arrows.

This was the first time in my life that I had been surrounded by so many people.

The question they wanted an answer to was the same for every one of them:

“Why were you and Nanami-san holding hands?” There wasn’t a single one of them that didn’t want an answer to that question.

Actually, of all of them, I was the one who most wanted to know the answer, but... Anyway, I answered them honestly.

“Nanami-san and I are going out now, so—”

“No way!”

My words were interrupted by the eager listeners. After all that, they didn’t believe me.

Actually, no. It was more that they didn’t *want* to believe me. After all, there was no way an introvert like me would be dating a girl like her.

Oh shoot, that was the equivalent of saying “someone like me” again. Nanami-san had told me not to do that. Well, I guess it was too much to ask me to change at the drop of a hat. It would be best to take my time working on it.

From that point until Nanami-san returned, I was bombarded by ceaseless questions. More and more students arrived as the morning drew on, and more and more came to surround me. Still, the gist of the questions remained the same.

As I was fumbling to answer the questions, the crowd suddenly parted.

It was like Moses parting the Red Sea. The crowd split right down the middle, and there I saw them: Nanami-san, Hatsumi-san, and Ayumi-san.

Like a scene from a movie, the three friends strutted down the open path. I couldn’t help but admire how cool they were. And when the trio stood before me, all eyes shifted from me to Nanami-san.

“Hey, Nanami, why were you holding hands with Misumai? Is it some kind of a game? If you’re messing around...”

“Excuse me? We were holding hands because I confessed to Yoshin yesterday, and now we’re going out. Isn’t it normal to hold hands with your boyfriend?”

Every eye in the room grew wide at Nanami-san’s straightforward response. The classroom, which had been noisy until then, now became wrapped in silence.



My male classmates' eyes brimmed with hopelessness, and some even crumpled to their knees. The girls looked back and forth between me and Nanami-san with a look of disbelief on their faces.

They hadn't believed a word I'd said, but when it came from Nanami-san, they gave way immediately. Wow, the kids at the top of the social caste truly were powerful...

"All right, all right, scram!" Hatsumi-san snapped. "They've just started dating, so don't crowd them."

"That's right; that's right!" Ayumi-san added. "Hey, leave them be, you guys."

Though reluctantly, the class returned to their seats. I took this as an opportunity to apologize.

"Oh, thank you. Um... Hatsumi-san and Ayumi-san, was it?"

Nanami-san pouted and puffed out her cheeks.

How cute. It's always so easy to tell when she's angry... No, wait, this is no time to get distracted.

Was she upset about something I'd said?

"Why are you calling Hatsumi and Ayumi by their names from the get-go? You called me by my last name at the beginning."

"Oh, um, it's just..."

Nanami-san was sulking.

No, no, I just said the names I heard a minute ago. I didn't mean anything else by it. I don't know how to react when you sulk in such an adorable way...

"Bwa ha ha ha ha! It can't be helped, Nanami. We've never talked with Misumai, so he probably doesn't know our names. I'm Hatsumi Otofuke. Good to meet you, Misumai."

"And I'm Ayumi Kamoenai. Fancy meeting you here, Nanami's boyfriend."

"She's right, Nanami-san. I didn't mean anything by it. It's nice to meet you, Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san. Thanks for the help, by the way."

As I thanked the two for coming to my rescue, I made sure to call them by their last names. Nanami-san's mood seemed to improve almost immediately, as she stopped pouting and broke into a smile.

Hmm, it seems I was a little too careless... From now on, I'll have to be careful. At the very least, I should learn to match some names to some faces.

As I came to my decision, Nanami-san took a deep breath, leaning closer to bring her face close to mine. Her sweet scent tickled my nose, and my heart began to beat faster.

"May I ask what you're doing for lunch today, Yoshin?"

"Lunch? I always eat in the cafeteria. Like, I just buy sandwiches and stuff."

"Actually, I kinda made you something," Nanami-san said, hiding her face slightly as she mumbled. "So, if it's okay with you—I mean, if it's not too much trouble—do you want to eat together later?"

It was hard to think with the whole class staring at us like that, but I somehow managed to blurt out a response.

"That's no trouble at all. I'd love to."

Now it finally made sense. *So that's why she was carrying a bigger bag than yesterday. But isn't this all just a dare? Aren't you getting a bit too serious about this, Nanami-san?*

I mean, I was happy. Very happy, in fact. But...how should I put this...? I was so surprised that my brain was having trouble processing everything fast enough.



Eating lunch with your girlfriend. I'm sure every guy has fantasized about it at least once. I don't think that's any different whether you're an introvert or otherwise—not that I can say for sure.

I, for one, an introvert through and through, had fantasized about it on multiple occasions. Hey, I was free to have whatever delusions I pleased.

This particular delusion went something like this: The girl and I head up to the school rooftop, where we sit down together, just the two of us. She opens the

bento box slowly, a little shyly, saying something about how she'd messed up. Contrary to her preface, though, the box is made up with a delicious-looking lunch that has been perfectly prepared. I eat it and tell her it's delicious, which makes her smile, and we spend a happy lunch hour together as we continue to chat.

It was a run-of-the-mill fantasy—I'm sure any guys out there can probably understand what I mean—but I never even imagined that it would actually happen to me. I always thought my fantasy would remain just that.

But it didn't remain a fantasy. My delusion was about to come true. What's more, the girl in that delusion was going to be Nanami-san.

The girl who'd confessed to me on a dare had met up with me before school so that we could walk there together holding hands, and she had even gone out of her way to prepare lunch for me.

Her commitment to the dare was next-level.

This was significant enough of an incident for me to think that. Still, maybe there was a chance that she liked me somewhat, even if that was a one-in-ten-thousand chance. Actually, no. It would be less than that, but there was still a minuscule possibility.

Yeah, right. Who was I kidding? I shouldn't get so full of myself. I couldn't even remember doing anything so far that would get her to like me like that. I *hadn't* done anything so far that would get her to like me like that.

I had to think of this as Nanami-san's way of pursuing the image of an "ideal girlfriend." Otherwise, I didn't think I could cope. The stares from those around us were already becoming too much to handle.

The two of us were on the school rooftop during lunch break. The rooftop at our school was open and accessible, so it wasn't unusual to see people eating there, but...

There were quite a lot of people there today. It couldn't just be my imagination.

"It feels good to be up here when the weather's so nice. Oh, that bench is free. Should we eat there? Let's go, Yoshin."

“Sounds good, Nanami-san.”

There’s really no need to mention why so many people were there. They’d probably gathered to observe Nanami-san and me having lunch together. Even though there were a lot of people up there, there was an obvious lack of people immediately around the two of us.

It was as if they’d all huddled around with us at the center to gaze at us from afar, creating a doughnut effect just like we’d learned about in class. This time, though, it was students moving to create the void we’d sat in rather than residents moving to the outskirts of a city.

As a side note, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san weren’t with us. The two girls had left, saying that they were going to eat lunch with their respective boyfriends. That is, they were sneaking off campus in order to do so.

I’d heard that they’d been eating lunch with Nanami-san until yesterday, so this was certainly a sudden change in practice. But maybe doing so had been their way of protecting the insecure Nanami-san—though this did seem a little overprotective.

Now, it seemed that the role of protector had been passed down to me. The fact that they weren’t here suggested as much. I was already feeling the pressure of having been entrusted with such a significant role. But more than that, the stares were starting to get to me.

I could bear the curious looks from the girls, at the very least. Sure, they weren’t pleasant, but they also weren’t doing me any harm. In fact, the girls seemed more interested in Nanami-san than in me—in the sense that they were probably wondering why she had chosen me. If that were the case, then my concern was more out of my own self-consciousness.

The problem was the stares from the guys. Their eyes directed a whole spectrum of emotions toward me: hatred, resentment, spite, jealousy, regret, and rage. Each stare was precisely what you would call a piercing look.

Since I was with Nanami-san, they didn’t seem likely to attack, but those eyes told me that they were ready to do so at any moment. If Nanami-san weren’t here protecting me, they would have gone in for the kill for sure. Seeing as they say “if looks could kill,” I would like to make a statement.

I feel like these looks are going to kill me.

I'm starting to feel queasy...

I wanted to scream at the guys around me to chill out—after all, Nanami-san was only doing this all for a dare—but since I couldn't do that, I just had to grin and bear it.

"What's wrong, Yoshin? Get over here."

Oblivious to my inner turmoil, Nanami-san had already taken a seat on the bench and was tapping the spot next to her. I guessed she was inviting me to sit there.

I followed her lead and sat down beside her. In her hands were two small bento boxes, one of which she handed to me.

"Is this what you woke up early for?" I asked nervously.

"Yeah, it is... Oh, are you not good with homemade stuff?"

"Oh, no. It's not that. I just meant it must have been a lot of trouble."

"Heh heh... I did my best," she said, blushing slightly.

A handmade bento that Nanami-san woke up early to make for me...

Yeah, wow. I was starting to feel like I could take on any stare sent my way. Maybe I was easily influenced or just too carefree, but either way, I was invincible in that moment—mentally speaking, of course.

"I actually wanted to surprise you at lunch, but Hatsumi worried me by asking what I was gonna do if you'd brought one yourself. I'm so glad you hadn't."

"It's still pretty unexpected. I'm flattered."

Day to day, I received lunch money from my parents, so I usually bought a sandwich at the school store or ate in the cafeteria, but I hadn't spent my lunch money at all that day. Well, even if I had brought my own lunch, I definitely would've eaten this bento. I wasn't the type to eat a lot, but this wasn't really a problem. Nope, I would eat it even if I had to force myself. This bento was just that important.

"Hey, maybe you should open it instead of staring off into space."

“Oh, yeah, sorry. You’re right. I’m really grateful for this,” I said.

I opened the long-awaited bento box that she’d handed me. Turns out, Nanami-san wasn’t actually the best at cooking, but I would make an effort to finish it anyway... Hah. Who am I kidding? The bento looked pretty— No. The bento looked amazing.

“Wow...”

I couldn’t help but let my admiration escape me. This bento, the very first girl-made bento I’d seen, was... How to put it... It looked so beautiful, it was almost too brilliant for me to handle.

Three adorably small rice balls, one wrapped in seaweed, another sprinkled with seasoning, were stunningly colorful despite being simple balls of rice. The omelet, not burnt but a beautiful yellow, was shining before me like gold. The main dish consisted of four pieces of fried chicken, vividly decorated with lettuce and cherry tomatoes.

I placed the opened bento slowly and cautiously on the bench. Nanami-san tilted her head as she watched, but without hesitation, I took out my phone to take pictures.

I took a bunch of photos in rapid succession, each from a different angle.

“Hey, wait! What are you doing?!”

“Well, I can’t eat such a work of art without keeping a record. It looks way too good for that.”

Even though I didn’t usually take pictures of my meals, I was overcome by a sense of duty to capture this one. Besides, this was my all-important first bento.

Unaffected by Nanami-san’s bewilderment, I took a dozen or so photos, and then, finally satisfied, I brought my hands together to express my gratitude toward Nanami-san and her delicious offerings.

“Thank you for the food,” I said.

“Bon appétit,” Nanami-san replied embarrassedly, a slight blush tinting her cheeks.

Somehow, that made me happy.

The softly shaped rice, made up of firm grains, melted inside my mouth. The omelet, neither too firm nor too soft, was slightly sweet, just the way I liked it. The batter on the chicken was still crispy despite having cooled, and its rich seasoning complemented the rice balls perfectly. I couldn't stop eating. In other words, everything was delicious.

I was completely engrossed in eating, but thinking it was best to say something, I picked up a second rice ball.

"These rice balls are pretty small, yet you still managed to make them perfectly round," I said.

"Thanks. My hands are so small, they end up that size no matter what I try. Did I make enough?"

As she spoke, Nanami-san waved her hands at me, making me acutely aware of the fact that those slender fingers had shaped the rice in my mouth. It was a dangerous thought. So many things were already dangerous. I couldn't say precisely what, but they were dangerous!

That's right, they're rice balls. Of course you make them with your hands.

Although my confusion had me at a loss for words, I continued savoring the handmade bento. Whether because I was solely focused on eating it or because the bento box was on the small side, I ended up finishing it in no time at all.

"Thanks for the meal. It was delicious."

"You're very welcome."

Seeing that Nanami-san still seemed to be eating, I immediately regretted wolfing it down so fast.

"You're a good cook, Nanami-san," I said.

"Making box lunches is basically my job at home, so today I just made one extra without telling my family."

I wonder if both her parents work like my parents do. Helping them out like this is really admirable.

Just as that thought had crossed my mind...

Grrgh...

...my stomach growled. The noise was quiet, but loud enough for Nanami-san to hear. At the sound, my face turned red, while her face drained of blood entirely.

“I...I’m sorry!” she cried. “Of course, you’re a boy, so my extra bento box wouldn’t be enough food for you, right?! Jeez, I should’ve thought more!”

My stupid stomach! Why couldn’t you hold out a bit longer?! A real man’s stomach would wait until we’re alone!

It was true, though. Sure, I wasn’t a glutton, but the amount of food just wasn’t enough. I’d begun to wonder whether to top it up with a sandwich from the school store, but because of my spineless stomach, I’d embarrassed her.

“I’m so sorry. I still have some of mine left. Here, take some.”

As I was reprimanding my stomach, Nanami-san held out a piece of chicken with her chopsticks.

Huh? What is the meaning of this? Does she really want me to open my mouth and say “ah”?! I’ve seen this happen plenty of times in manga, so I’m pretty sure I’m right.

Realizing what she was offering, Nanami-san turned red, but she didn’t withdraw her chopsticks. In fact, she held them out toward me with even greater resolve.



The noise surrounding us disappeared as those around us held their breaths. There's no way I was just imagining it.

Shaking slightly, I decided I couldn't keep her waiting, so I hastily accepted the chicken with my mouth. I couldn't even taste it because of how nervous I was, but it was probably even tastier than before. There was no way it wouldn't be.

Stomach, you've done well. My palm was moving in circles like a drill on my stomach, but it wasn't a problem. *You did a good deed, so I should praise you.*

Nanami-san pulled back her chopsticks and continued eating her bento quietly. "When I'm, um, with Hatsumi and Ayumi, we feed each other like that all the time, so..."

"O-Oh... I-Is that right?"

For a good while after that, we were too embarrassed to continue our conversation. Only once she and I had stopped blushing and our faces had returned to their usual color did we manage to speak again.

During that conversation, I admitted openly and honestly that the food wasn't quite enough for me, rather than having my stomach give me away again. I had been satiated in various ways up till that point, but it was true that I wanted to eat a bit more.

"In that case, why don't we go buy a bigger bento box for you on our way home?"

Caught by surprise, my brain stopped working. "You mean you're willing to make lunch for me again tomorrow?"

"That's what I was planning, but is that okay?"

"More than okay. I would be extremely grateful for such kindness."

The strange string of words fell out of my mouth because I was so worked up, but Nanami-san simply smiled, holding a hand to her chest in relief. "I'm glad," she said.

God... Now I'll have no regrets if I die here. The apex of my life is probably this very moment! These stares may kill me, but who cares? I'll never encounter happiness greater than this.

Nanami-san smiled shyly, her cheeks flushed and her head tilted as she whispered, “It’s a date.”

God... I take that back. I'll continue living no matter what!

As the stares of murderous intent intensified, I sat there determined to make it through this.



That day after school, Nanami-san and I made our way to a shop that carried a variety of home goods. The purpose of our visit, of course, was to buy me a larger bento box.

Perhaps because of my resolve at lunchtime, I had somehow made it through the day. It wasn’t like anyone had physically attacked me, but the hostility directed at me was weapon enough. Honestly, the thought of going to school tomorrow was making me feel pretty despondent.

“What’s wrong, Yoshin? You look kind of down.”

“Oh, it’s nothing, Nanami-san.”

“Are you sure? Oh... Did you not want to hold hands? I feel really bad...”

“No, no! That’s not it at all. Being able to hold hands with you, um, makes me happy.”

Nanami-san had spoken with a look of worry on her face, but hearing my response, she perked up again. Just like that, the dark cloud hanging over tomorrow dissipated.

Feeling the warmth of her hand in mine, I was filled with a new sense of optimism. Tomorrow, I would get to eat another of Nanami-san’s homemade bento. True, she was also the cause of my anxiety, but I wasn’t going to think about that for now.

From then on, we began picking out our bento box. As we looked around, chatting about this and that, I couldn’t help but daydream we were just like a newlywed couple.

It was then that Nanami-san smiled at me.

“We must look like newlyweds. It’s funny, right?”

My joy at learning she was thinking the same thing as I was, along with seeing her embarrassed face, absolutely destroyed me. *I seriously think I’m gonna die. Thank heavens.*

“I... I was just thinking the same thing,” I replied in almost a whisper.

Flustered, Nanami-san turned crimson and slapped me on the back several times.

What a pleasant pain... No, I’m not a masochist; I’m just really happy, like every single thing she does fills me with joy.

As we flirted with each other, I realized just how much my thinking had changed in a way that I never would have thought. But right at that moment, as we finished selecting a bento box, a brand new problem arose.

“Okay, I’ll go buy this one then,” Nanami-san said, starting off toward the checkout line.

I immediately panicked and stopped her. I could buy my own bento box. What kind of a boyfriend would make his girlfriend buy his lunch box when she was already making him lunch? Even I knew that that wouldn’t fly. It would make me seem like I was only there to take advantage of her financially.

Hell, I still wanted to pay for the ingredients for today’s lunch, but when I offered, Nanami-san shook her head, firmly insisting that she had made it for me because she’d wanted to.

Since that was the case, I told her I’d buy the box myself. I mean, that was the least I could do. But even though my offer was totally normal, her face brightened when I handed her the box.

“It feels like a present,” she said, holding the box like a treasure.

A more attractive guy than myself would have offered up a smooth response, but unfortunately, that wasn’t possible for me.

“I’ll be in your care,” was all I could say as I bowed my head.

She didn’t seem to mind even that. “Leave it to me,” she replied, smiling brightly.

Why is she being so good to me? What does that smile even mean?

On our way home from the store, Nanami-san asked what I wanted for tomorrow's lunch. Honestly, I'd be happy with anything Nanami-san made, but saying so wouldn't have been the most helpful answer. Instead, I went ahead and requested the first thing that popped into my head.

"Um... Hamburger steak?"

"Hamburger steak, got it. Oh, can you eat bell peppers?"

"Sure. I can eat pretty much anything as long as there are no really strong herbs like cilantro."

"I can't do cilantro either. But I kinda wish you'd said you could eat anything as long as I made it."

I see, so that's how I was supposed to respond. I've learned something.

Seeing her smile, I repeated the phrase back to her knowing I was too late, but she laughed out loud at me anyway. Well, I guess it was fine as long as she found it funny.

We walked together as we talked. Of course, we were still holding hands. I felt like I was able to talk a little more smoothly than the day before, and I was enjoying myself despite the nerves.

When we finally arrived at the train station, we let go of each other's hand, and Nanami-san told me she'd call me that night.

Unable to think of anything smart in return, I nodded in affirmation, but deep down, I wanted to kick myself.

Welp, it can't be helped. In moments like these, when I least expect it, I can't help but remember. After all, she's only going out with me because it's a dare.



Canyon: ...So yeah, that's what happened today.

Once I got back, I gave a full report of the day's events to Baron-san. I'd overtaken the chat, but he listened to me until the end without interrupting me once.

Baron: Wait, you're sounding all negative there, but doesn't it seem like the dare doesn't really mean anything to her at this point? She's totally into you.

Baron-san may have listened to me until the end, but his response seemed to suggest that my inner turmoil was utterly meaningless. Of course, I told him that what he was saying was ridiculous.

Baron: I mean, you already cleared the whole holding hands thing, which I thought would be impossible for you. Then she made you lunch all by herself and even fed it to you from her own chopsticks. I mean, she just confessed to you yesterday, right? What kind of pacing is that? It's just not normal.

Hey, wait a minute, you thought I couldn't make it? Well, it's best not to dwell on that. I'm getting free advice from him after all, so I should just take it to mean he was setting high expectations.

Canyon: No, she's dating me to get comfortable around guys, so she's probably just treating me as her test dummy.

Baron: But with this being a dare, I thought she'd be more administrative, or that she might even say something like "I'm doing you a favor by going out with you, so don't get cocky and don't talk to me at school" or something.

Canyon: She's not like that.

Of course, Baron-san didn't mean any harm by what he'd said, but I just couldn't help objecting. Hearing someone say such negative things about Nanami-san, even if they were just presumptions, had irked me. It was unlike me to be so defensive, but I just wasn't mature enough to handle it. I'm pretty sure my annoyance was undetectable over chat, though.

Baron: At any rate, as for her current behavior, there are probably a few possibilities. Possibility One: she's a devilish type who finds pleasure in toying with men. What would you call that, a femme fatale?

Canyon: I don't think that's the case. When they were deciding on the dare, her friends said she wasn't used to being around guys.

That was precisely why I —the apparently no-libido and celibate type —had been chosen. Besides, if she were that type of person, she wouldn't have rejected all those handsome guys who'd approached her before and instead would have proactively dated them.

In terms of Possibility One, I could say there wasn't the slightest chance.

Baron: Possibility Two: since the time limit of your relationship has already been set, there's no worry about having you dislike her, so she's trying out her ideal image of what a girlfriend should be.

I see... That was Nanami-san acting as the perfect girlfriend... I had thought it was strange that she was so assertive when she wasn't used to guys, but if she had been making an effort to act out a part, then it all made sense.

But, if that really was an act, women sure are scary. I've thought this before, but she could probably make a living as an actress. She's beautiful; she's cute; she's stylish; and she's nice— Wait, did I mention she's cute?

Baron: Possibility Three: since you saved her on the day of the confession, she's already smitten with you.

Canyon: That's the least likely of all the options. I mean, all I did was cover her so that she wouldn't get drenched in water. Is falling for someone because of that even possible?

I wish he'd stop calling it that. Besides, anyone could've done what I did. Would you fall for someone just for that? Though I guess I'm not in any position to say anything, given that I was totally at her mercy all day today. But still, as a motive to like me... I can't quite believe it.

Baron: Possibility Four: you were actually reincarnated into this world, and you have the cheat ability of making women who confess to you smitten with you.

Canyon: Don't you think that ability's a bit too specific?

If a woman confessed to you, they would usually already be smitten with you

at that point, so it was a meaningless ability that you wouldn't even notice. Baron-san had sure come up with a weird punch line.

Baron: Well, I think Possibility Three is the most likely.

Peach: I think it's the first one. You should break up with her before she hurts you.

No sooner had Peach-san entered the conversation than she was gone again. She sure was tough on Nanami-san. She probably just couldn't stand to watch someone being toyed with. If anything, I would say she had a strong sense of justice.

Canyon: Out of those, I'd say it's probably the second option. I'm probably just a practice run, so she doesn't have to worry about me disliking her. She can try different things and act however she wants without worrying about other people.

Baron: Well, whichever it is doesn't really change what you do from now on.

Canyon: That's true...

A moment ago, Peach-san had advised me to end the relationship immediately. She'd probably said that to protect me, but in terms of toying with people, I was probably no better than Nanami-san.

Even if I get her to like me during this dare, then what?

Baron: So, after she made you bento, did you do anything to thank her, Canyon-kun?

Canyon: Oh, well, I did thank her, but I haven't really done anything in return.

As I was sitting there thinking about what I should do, Baron-san revisited the day's events.

That's right, she made me a bento and fed me the fried chicken, yet all I could do was to say thank you. She refused money for the ingredients, so there was no way for me to thank her properly.

When I told him that, Baron-san responded in exasperation.

Baron: Money for ingredients? Look, you're not dealing with a bento shop here. You've gotta give her sweets or something, or thank her in a more thoughtful way.

Oh, I see... That was an option. I didn't even think of it. Or rather, I was so worked up that the thought hadn't even crossed my mind. Well, no. We walked home together, so there were plenty of opportunities. My bad.

Canyon: True. I know it's bad to realize that now, but from tomorrow I'll...

Baron: Oh, wait, Canyon-kun. Since you didn't really do anything today, I've thought of your next mission. That mission...is to ask her out on a date.

Canyon: A date?!

I immediately began to panic. Asking Nanami-san out on a date was a tall order, so tall that I was sure I couldn't do it, and yet this was the task he was entrusting to me.

Earlier, Nanami-san had called that day's outing a date, which had been fine as an extension of walking home together. But to invite her out on a date myself... This was a whole new level of difficulty.

Baron: There's no need to think too hard about it. She asked for an equal relationship, right? So, in return for the bento, you have to reciprocate accordingly. You should go see a movie this Saturday or something. That's pretty standard.

A movie date... What was he talking about? I was pretty sure I couldn't do it, but Baron-san was telling me to regardless. Just how difficult did he want to make things?

Baron: Though it might sound a little old-fashioned, it'll be best if you pay for the date. If you say it's to thank her for making you lunch, she'll probably accept right away. You still get lunch money from your parents, so if you save that up, you'll be fine, right?

Nanami-san had said that she would make lunch for me every day from now on. I felt bad about just accepting that, which felt like a far cry from a

relationship on an equal footing. In order to continue going out with her, I would have to reciprocate appropriately, or else I would be forever in her debt.

At the end of the day, our relationship was based on a dare, so I had to keep things equal between us. No matter what happened from here on out, no matter the outcome, I wanted to be sincere until then.

Baron: You talked too much about yourself today. That probably just means she's a good conversationalist, but starting tomorrow, it'll be good for you to learn more about her. Try asking her what kinds of movies and things she likes.

Canyon: That seems like quite a hurdle, but I'll do my best!

Even though Baron-san couldn't see it, I clenched my fist as I made up my mind.

Baron: Once you decide what movie to watch, reserve the tickets in advance. Trying to buy them on the day will make things way too hectic, and she might offer to pay for her own half. If you do so ahead of time, that won't happen.

Canyon: Thank you so much for everything. By the way, is that information also from...?

Baron: Of course I got it straight from the internet. It seems like the smooth thing to do for a movie date. You can do the same thing when you're settling the bill for lunch by paying for it quickly when you leave your table for something.

Regardless of where the information came from, it was decent enough advice to keep in mind.

Baron: Mind you, what's important here is that you're the one to ask her out. You can't always just wait and see where the moment takes you. You have to take the reins and show her just how interested you are in her. Otherwise, she'll never properly like you. That said, I think she already likes you a ton.

I appreciated the advice, but I couldn't quite agree with that last point, though that probably had more to do with my insufficient confidence.

Canyon: Thanks, Baron-san.

Baron: Not at all. I hope it works out for you. And Canyon-kun...although it's important to have her like you, you should make an effort to like her too. If you can continue dating, as someone who didn't have a decent time as a student myself, I would be very happy for you.

Canyon: Yes, I understand. I'll work hard to like her too.

Although I'd told Baron-san that I'd work hard, I was already doing fine on that front. After all, in just one day, even knowing that this was a dare, I was already starting to like her. Well, no. If I'm completely honest, I already liked her a ton. I at least had that much self-awareness.

I'm so easy... Too easy. Maybe it can't be helped as a teenage boy.

Just then, my thoughts were interrupted by my phone receiving a message. The sender was Nanami-san, and the message was a single sentence:

Nanami: ...Is it okay if I call you now?

The moment I read it, my earlier resolve was blown away, and I was struck by a sense of panic.

Canyon: Wh-What should I do, Baron-san?! She asked if she could call me! What am I supposed to do?!

Baron: Cool it, Canyon-kun. She told you she'd call you, so of course she would. Don't worry about the chat, and go ahead and talk to her. Just keep cool, okay?

Having been reminded by Baron-san, I remembered that she had in fact told me she'd call me. Perhaps I should have been the one to contact her first, but it was too late now that she'd beat me to it. I'd have to build on that lesson for next time.

For the time being, I paused for a beat and then replied.

Yoshin: Sure, that'd be great. I'll call you.

Once I saw that the message had been read, I gave her a call.

She picked up on the very first ring.

“Hi, Yoshin. Sorry it’s so late. I meant to call earlier, but I got caught up in a long conversation with Hatsumi and Ayumi. What were you up to? Playing a game?”

“Ah, yeah, I was. Gaming and working out are about the only hobbies I have, really.”

I couldn’t very well tell her that I had been discussing tomorrow’s plans with Baron-san while playing, so I tried my best to be honest about my hobbies. I couldn’t come up with any interesting topics of conversation, so that was the most I could say.

However, despite the fact that this wasn’t my first time talking on my phone, I was nervous because I was talking with Nanami-san. My heart was pounding as she seemed to speak directly into my ear. Even her voice was pretty. Just having my phone up to my ear made it feel like I was somewhere else with her.

“Working out, huh? You’re surprisingly fit. Why don’t you join a sports club? Not that I do any sports either, but...”

“I’m just not good at athletic stuff. For now, it’s enough to watch videos and figure it out myself. I don’t dislike exercise or anything, so I end up lifting weights a lot.”

“Ha ha, I know what you mean. You’re pretty quiet, so you don’t seem like the jock type.”

Her laughter rang comfortably in my ear.

Wait, no. How have I ended up talking about myself again? I have to ask her more about herself. Um, the topic she’d mentioned earlier was...

“So, um, what were you talking about with Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san?”

“Oh, you know, I asked them whether I was weird at all yesterday. Like, was I annoying? Had I bothered you? It’s, um, my first time going out with a guy, so I had the two of them grade me, and we talked about some other things too.”

If I had had to answer, I’d have said she’d acted weird from beginning to end. Though for me, that wasn’t in a bad way, but rather, in a very good way. The girl

who'd rejected countless good-looking guys had shown up to school holding hands with me, so if you couldn't call that weird, what could you call it?

But what did she mean by "other things"? Had they perhaps been talking about the dare? I didn't know for certain what it was they'd discussed, but she seemed reluctant to tell me.

Still, her voice on the phone sounded a little uneasy. Telling her that she'd acted weird earlier would probably only make her more anxious. So, instead, I decided to share with her the good parts.

"I'd never held hands with a girl before, much less gone out with one. It was my first time receiving a handmade bento too. It was a day filled with loads of new experiences, but every one made me happy."

These were my honest thoughts from the bottom of my heart. In just one day, enough had happened to completely reshuffle my list of things that made my high school life a happy one. Until now, I'd focused on things like getting the character I wanted in my game or ranking up, but today had been such a parade of fun that it made such things pale in comparison.

"Really? It's just that you seem so strangely calm. You keep such a low profile at school and all, but you have to be more experienced with girls than you're letting on. Am I *really* your first girlfriend? You can tell me, you know."

That's only because I got loads of advice from Baron-san beforehand, not because I wasn't nervous. But apparently, to her, I had seemed cool and collected.

"You even showed up at exactly the same time as me that first day. I was totally prepared to wait a long time."

"That really was just a coincidence. I couldn't sleep a wink, honestly."

"Was it also just a coincidence that you noticed I changed my hairstyle?"

That, too, had been a coincidence. If I hadn't gotten advice from Baron-san, I probably wouldn't have even noticed, and even if I had, I probably wouldn't have been able to bring myself to tell her that it was cute. Well, the only reason I had been able to say that was because she'd prompted me to, but anyway...

“Yeah, that too. I couldn’t even bring myself to tell you it was cute until you mentioned it, remember? That’s how much of a dummy I am. Even now, I’m nervous about talking to a girl on the phone.”

“Wait, did I force you to say that it was cute?”

“Oh, no. I really did mean what I said. It’s just that saying that out loud was also a first for me, so I felt kind of embarrassed about it.”

“Ha ha, I see. So you really did mean it. Huh... You actually thought it was cute then. Thanks.”

The soft whisper of her voice lingered in my ear, and our conversation paused for a moment. *Shoot, where should I go from here?*

No, wait. Baron-san told me to ask more about her. Anything is fine, anything... Be brave, Yoshin!

“I... I told you my hobbies were gaming and working out, but what are your hobbies, Nanami-san?”

“My hobbies? Hmm, there’s reading, watching movies, eating good food...oh, and going shopping. They’re pretty mundane hobbies, I guess.”

Movies! She said movies! Going to the movies was my mission from Baron-san!

I only really watched anime movies or tokusatsu films with heavy special effects, so I wasn’t terribly familiar with normal films. This was finally my chance to get to know her taste in movies. *You can do it, Yoshin!*

“Movies, huh? I don’t watch that many movies, but what kinds do you like?”

“Me? Let’s see... I like action movies, romantic movies... But I’m not very good with sad stories or horror. I like movies with happy endings. Do you like anime movies, Yoshin? Like, movies with characters like in your icon?”

She got me.

Now that she mentioned it, I’d totally forgotten to change my icon. Her tone toward the end sounded a little bit teasing, but it didn’t feel malicious. Perhaps it even felt kind of nice to have her tease me like that.

“Yeah, I like anime movies. You watch them too, right?”

“Mmm... You really do respond like you’re super calm. I was kind of hoping to hear you get a little more flustered. Oh well, I guess that’s just something I’ll have to look forward to.”

That hadn’t been me responding calmly, but rather me simply giving up, but it seemed that to her I sounded calm.

“Since you like movies, Nanami-san, can I ask what kinds of movies are out right now? I don’t really know much about them.”

“Well, a little while ago, I wanted to see the latest movie based on an American comic book, but I’ve changed my mind since then and decided I actually want to see this new romance film that everyone’s been talking about. I heard there are some adult scenes in it though, so I’ve been avoiding it.”

“Then, this Saturday, do you want to go see it together?”

“Huh?”

Yeah, actually, I wanted to say “Huh?” to myself at that moment. *What did I just say? Why am I inviting her now?* And from the flow of that conversation, I had just painted myself as “the guy who wants to go see a movie that has some naughty love scenes.”

Nanami-san grew silent at the words that had popped out of my mouth on reflex. I had no choice but to say something!

“Ah, no, don’t get me wrong. It’s not that I want to go to watch something indecent with you. It’s just, you said you’d make more lunches for me, right? So I just thought—as thanks, you know?—it’d be nice if you’d let me treat you to a movie. So, uh, I don’t have any ulterior motives, okay? Nanami-san? Hey, are you listening? Are you there? Hello?”

The only response she gave to my excuses was total silence. At that, I started to panic a little—no, a lot. We’d only been dating for a day. Had I already screwed up?

As I was beginning to sink into a pit of hopelessness, I heard her laugh over the phone.

“Pfft... Ha ha ha ha! I finally got to hear you all flustered. Yeah, I like you better this way than when you’re all composed. How cute! It’s okay, I know. It’s just...” Nanami-san lowered her voice and continued softly, sounding apologetic. “It’s just that I promised Hatsumi and Ayumi that I’d go to see that movie with them this Saturday. If I knew you were going to ask, I would have called you first.”

Hearing the sadness in her voice, I realized my plan had failed. Of course, if she was going to watch it with her girlfriends, then that couldn’t be helped. It was natural to prioritize prior engagements.

Actually, no. Even Baron-san had told me that the important thing was that I be the one to ask her out on a date myself. What was I doing, giving up so fast? There was only one thing left to do!

“...Sunday.”

“Huh?”

“Are you free on Sunday? If you are, would you...would you like to go on a movie date with me on Sunday? Of course, I’ll pay for everything, since this is to thank you for the bento. And I’ll look up movies you might like, so...would you like to go watch a movie with me?”

Out of sheer excitement and haste, I’d switched back to speaking to her politely, and I was once again greeted with silence.

If she rejected me again, I would probably be very, *very* bummed. I would probably be so bummed that I would be depressed for three full days—no, maybe a week. That was just how much courage I’d had to muster to ask her out.

Sunday was the final day for the in-game tournament. It was the most exciting day of the event, but I was choosing Nanami-san over that.

After a long silence, Nanami-san finally spoke.

“The date is to thank me for the bento, right?”

“Yes, of course. So tomorrow, please tell me all about your favorite genres and movies.”

“If that’s the case,” she said slowly, “I’ll have to put even more of an effort into your lunches starting tomorrow, huh? I’ll make them so good that you’ll want to thank me for every one of them.”

“You mean...”

“Yes. On Sunday, let’s go on a date.”

I had to resist the urge to scream into my phone and instead answered, “Yes, let’s!” extremely enthusiastically. In that moment, I probably had the creepiest smile on my face, accompanied by the creepiest of body movements, to express the joy of my entire being. It was a relief that she wasn’t able to see me.

“Well, it’s time for me to head off to bed,” she said, calling it a night. “Good night, Yoshin.”

“Good night, Nanami-san.”

With the phone hung up, I started up my chat app with Baron-san and company. Everyone present had been writing predictions about my conversation with Nanami-san, but I ignored them to send a direct message to Baron-san.

Canyon: Baron-san, talking with a girl at night is amazing... I’m not sure if I’ll be able to get any sleep.

Baron: What in the world did you talk about? You really should take this opportunity to get your act together.

Canyon: Oh, you know that movie? We’ll be going on Sunday instead of Saturday, so I won’t be able to join the event that day. I’m sorry.

Baron: Oh, that’s totally fine—say, what?! You already asked her out?! I know I was the one who suggested the whole thing, but aren’t things moving too fast? Are you okay? You’re not pushing yourself too hard, are you?

Oh, most definitely... But I have no regrets.

Canyon: It’s okay! I successfully asked her out! I did it, Baron-san! I manned up and took control!

Baron: Um, right. You seem awfully excitable right now. Don’t tell me you asked her out on the spur of the moment?

Canyon: What are you talking about?! I'm perfectly chill! I'm going to work hard for this date on Sunday!

Baron: Uh, right. Take it easy there.

In contrast to Baron-san's bewilderment, my own mood was soaring with excitement. Looks like I wouldn't be getting any sleep again after all.

Interlude: Her Change

“Good night, Nanami-san.”

With Yoshin’s words ringing comfortably in my ear, I sat there ruminating on them. This wasn’t my first time talking to a boy, and though I didn’t exactly enjoy doing it, talking with Yoshin made my heart flutter.

It was as if he were speaking directly into my ear. The telephone was a pretty amazing invention—I didn’t know who’d invented it, neither their name nor what they looked like, but I owed whoever it was my gratitude.

Come to think of it, this was my first time talking with a guy in private—and so late at night in my room, to boot.

“Oh my god, seriously?! This is too much!”

I flopped facedown on my bed and began wildly kicking my feet. It didn’t really help with anything, but I was too worked up to relax.

No, this was no good. I just couldn’t control my feelings. I was restless; my head felt all fuzzy; and I felt dazed, as if I had a fever.

“I can’t stand up to Hatsumi and Ayumi if I’m like this...”

From the get-go, the day had been a string of unbelievable events. In the morning, when I’d arrived at our meeting spot super early and begun thinking about how to kill time, Yoshin had found me right away. Not only that, but he had noticed my new hairstyle and told me it was pretty, even if he’d said it somewhat embarrassedly. I couldn’t help but think he was the cute one for getting so flustered over something so small.

Flattered by his comment, I’d gotten ahead of myself and thoughtlessly suggested we hold hands. Inside, I’d immediately started panicking, asking myself why I’d gone and said something like that, but the touch of his hand had blown all my worries away.

His warm hand had felt so comfortable in mine, and my heart began

throbbing from excitement. I'd never held hands with a guy before. *My hands weren't super sweaty or anything, right?*

My heart had continued pounding as I asked him to lunch. I'd been all worried when Hatsumi had suggested he might have brought his own, so hearing that he hadn't had flooded my body with relief. Still, I was mildly regretting not having asked him about this in advance. *Was there anything he didn't like eating? Would he mind eating something made at home?* Sure, I'd managed to ask him out, but I was still as nervous as ever.

He'd poked my cheek too, and then for some reason, I'd ended up feeding him from my own chopsticks! *Why did I feed him like that?!* But once I'd started, I couldn't back down.

Please, Yoshin! I'd internally screamed, desperate for him to take the bite. *Hurry up and eat it! Everyone's staring, and I know I started this, but I'm actually super embarrassed!*

When he finally did eat the chicken I'd offered, I was able to continue eating my lunch, but...

Wait, was that an indirect kiss?! Wooow, it had taken me so long to realize, and when I finally did, I was even more embarrassed. I pressed my hands against my red-hot cheeks and curled up into a ball on my bed.

You should have told me, Yoshin. Really? An indirect kiss...

Actually, if he had told me that, I probably would have died from embarrassment. Not that Yoshin would ever say anything like that.

Had he known all along?

And, at the end of the day, we'd gone on a little shopping date after school. *If it was a shopping date, does that make it our first date? Or did that not really count?*

From start to finish, everything had been a first for me. Well, I guess he was my first boyfriend, so that made sense.

Yoshin was only my boyfriend because of a dare, but being with him was so much fun—so much so that I couldn't wait to spend more time with him. Even

so, I couldn't shake off the feeling of guilt.

I stole a glance at Yoshin's new bento box that I'd surreptitiously placed in my room. It was my treasured item—the first thing he'd ever bought for me.

Well, saying he'd bought it for me wasn't quite right. Now that I thought about it, I understood why he'd offered to buy it himself, but I'd been too worked up at the time to notice. Still, the box was the closest I'd come to receiving a gift from Yoshin, so I'd brought it to my room rather than hiding it in the kitchen.

Every day from now on, I was going to pack it with a homemade lunch and hand it to him. Just the thought was making me feel all warm inside.

"Aww, a handmade bento from the loving wifey, aye?"

The grinning faces of Hatsumi and Ayumi had immediately popped into my head.

"I'm not a loving wifey yet!" I cried, sitting up in bed with way too much momentum.

Jeez, this is all because they said such silly things. Of course I'll put my love into it—that's what cooking is all about! I'll even put all of my love into it, but that's no different to how a mother makes lunch for her kids. Yeah, that's right! It's the exact same kind of love, probably.

The more I thought about it, the hotter my face grew and the more I squirmed on my bed.

"I mean, what gives?" Hatsumi had asked as they'd grilled me before school that morning. *"You've always been afraid of guys, but you show up to school holding hands with one..."*

Seriously, Hatsumi, that's what I want to know.

"I'm sooo jealous. Gee, I'd love to hold my boyfriend's hand on the way to school. Not that I can, but..."

Ayumi, on the other hand, had been envious. True, it *had* just been a walk to school, but I'd had so much fun. Going to school with friends was fun too, of course, but this was a different kind of fun. Ayumi's envy was understandable

considering she couldn't enjoy that herself.

Regardless of their reactions, I told them about everything that had happened during the confession—and I mean *everything*, including the fact that Yoshin saved me. The two had listened closely without a single interruption.

“Wow... Way to go, Misumai. He saved you, and you totally fell for him, huh? I see. Well, if that's the case, we were totally right to be worried about you. What kind of friends would we be if we left our oh-so-impressionable Nanami behind and went off to vocational schools without her?”

“It's true, you really are too easy, but we were totally right to choose Misumai, huh? He seems just the guy to turn to in a tight spot, so he's the perfect match for our Nanami.”

How rude. I'm not in the slightest bit too easy!

Despite their insults, I'd felt happy that the two of them were complimenting Yoshin. I'd felt so happy, in fact, that I'd continued talking their ears off about him—this being only our second day of dating aside. By the time I'd realized just how much I'd been talking, they were both grinning at me in amusement. Mixed with that amusement, though, had been a look of relief. My ramblings had seemingly been less of a report on how the confession had gone, and more like...

“That was regular girl talk, wasn't it? We've never done that sort of thing before, but it *was* kinda fun.”

Girl talk among the three of us...

The three of us had even been chatting before my call with Yoshin. Even though it had felt like I was the one doing all the speaking, the two of them had sat back and listened. They'd even given me the irresponsible advice that it was okay to be more proactive. Hold up—there was no way I could do that!

Our conversation had finally ended with them kicking me off the call.

“Stop going on about how in love you are, and just go call him already!”

Do I really seem that in love? How embarrassing.

Even so, it had taken me some time to get myself to contact him. I'd sat

having a staring contest with my phone's home screen, unable to muster the courage, all the while asking myself how on earth I was going to do this.

Would I be bothering him? Is he already asleep? I'd wondered, battling the thoughts in my head. *But I kind of want to hear his voice. What should I do?*

In the end, I'd decided to start off by sending a text. Sure, I admit it—I was a wuss.

Then Yoshin had called me himself, which I'd been really glad about, and as we'd continued talking, he'd asked me out on a date.

I'd been utterly overwhelmed by his forwardness, considering he was so quiet at school. But I didn't dislike it. My only regret was that I'd already made plans for Saturday.

His fluster at my response had been super cute, and even though I'd done my best to keep my cool, my heart had been racing in my chest. That aside, it really was a bummer that we wouldn't get to go on the date.

But he hadn't stopped there. Suddenly, his manner had stiffened, and he'd asked me out on a date for Sunday. Of course, the answer was obvious.

Actually, though, I'd been planning to ask him out on a date for Sunday. I felt like he'd beaten me to it. I was a little miffed about it, but my elation overrode that feeling. Yoshin had invited me on a date. I was so happy about that. Too happy. Why was I so happy?

A date... If we don't count our shopping trip today, will this be our very first date? Sunday is our first date... I couldn't stop my feelings from ballooning with joy.

"I've got to make tomorrow's lunch a good one. Oh, but I've gotta make sure mom doesn't find out yet."

Either way, Yoshin sure was polite. He didn't have to worry about thanking me for the lunches. I was doing this because I liked him.

Like him? Like whom? No, I like cooking, and I'm practicing how to be a good girlfriend. That's all. Granted, that excuse wasn't gonna cut it.

Anyway, in an attempt to reign in my overexcitement, I began to think about

tomorrow's lunch.

Yoshin said he wanted a hamburger steak, so I'll make him a supersized one. Will it fit in the box we bought? Would he like an omelet too? Come to think of it, does he like sweet ones or salty ones? I should have asked him earlier. Should I make rice balls, or should I use pink fish flakes to draw a giant heart on a bed of white rice?

Um, yeah, I'm too embarrassed to make a heart, and I don't know what people will say if they find out, so I'll just make rice balls.

He'd told me he could eat anything as long as it wasn't too herby, but I hadn't really been in the right state of mind to ask for any more details.

I wanted to talk to him about so much more tomorrow. I wanted to know more about him, and I wanted him to learn more about me. But since that was the case...

"A month is so short..." I mumbled subconsciously.

"It's just a dare, so there's no need to force yourself to keep going out with them, but of course it's okay if you do!"

That's what my friends had told me back when this had all started. To think I'd worried that a month would be way too long. It was rude enough to think that in the first place, but I hadn't had the faintest clue what I was supposed to do during that time.

But now things were different. A month felt far too short. I was surprised my feelings could change so much in the span of a single day.

I wanted to go get boba with Yoshin. He'd probably never had it before, so I would like to be the one to show him. I wanted him to try more of my cooking. Not just the bento, but also my freshly made meals. I wanted him to say they were delicious.

In that case, would I have to go to his house? I was nervous just thinking about it.

If we continued dating, loads of events would come up. Festivals together sounded like a heap of fun, and for summer break, I wanted to go to the beach.

Then there was Halloween, Christmas, and even Valentine's Day.

Things I wanted to do, things I wanted to do for him, things I wanted him to do for me... When I started thinking of all those things, a month really did feel too short.

"Are you gonna kiss him tomorrow?"

"Not yet! I can't!" I cried as Hatsumi and Ayumi popped back into my head.

This time, though, my mom popped her head round the door to scold me for all the noise. *My bad. I have to stay calm.*

Yoshin was so calm, unlike me. At school, he seemed really quiet, but maybe he was just really mature. He probably didn't even know I was nervous the whole time we'd been talking on the phone.

Come to think of it, why had he spoken so politely when he'd invited me out that second time? The thought that maybe he was actually as nervous as I was reassured me a little.

A month from now, what was I going to do?

I was so scared that Yoshin would find out about the dare and leave me. Just thinking about it made me want to cry.

"Am I really too easy?" I wondered.

No, that can't possibly be true. I'm not easy... But even as I thought that, I realized I had no legs to stand on. No matter what excuse I gave my friends, I couldn't get Yoshin out of my head.

That was why I made a decision—to follow my friends' advice. *I'll be super proactive, just you watch!*

"I'm gonna get Yoshin to like me, and I'll do so with my cooking! We're gonna do lots of fun things! I...I'm still too embarrassed to kiss him, but still, if I do that, there's no way he could leave me!"

I really was the worst. I was going to capture his heart so completely that even if he did find out about the dare, he would forgive me.

I'm going to make Yoshin smitten with me. This was the best I could do, given

that I still didn't have the guts to tell him the full story.

"That means tomorrow is another day of bento making! Let's do this!"

As I stood up on my bed in sheer determination, my mom came back to yell at me. But now that I'd finally decided on a plan, there was no time left for hesitation.

With my plan for the coming weeks set, I crawled into bed and fell fast asleep, praying I'd see Yoshin in my dreams. *No, wait. Why would I think that? Jeez, maybe I really am too easy...*

Chapter 3: A Challenger Appears

I'd thought I had no regrets about my actions that night, but the second I woke up, I regretted everything. Good grief, it was too early for regrets, even for me.

"I shouldn't get so worked up before bed..." I muttered, sitting up to hold my head in my hands.

Why the hell had I chosen *then* to ask her out? I must've seemed super pushy.

I wasn't regretting asking her out. I was regretting the fact that I might have scared Nanami-san. I had to think long and hard about having let myself get so carried away. At the very least, she'd *sounded* happy, so I decided not to think of it as a mistake. But even so, I thought it best to apologize later that day.

I got myself together and prepared to head off to school, only to discover my mom downstairs in the living room. She would usually have gone off to work by now, so this was a rare occasion.

"Morning, mom."

"Good morning. My, you're up awfully early, Yoshin. And for the second day running! Is there something going on?"

Hm, she's a sharp one. Maybe she'd waited for me instead of heading off to work because she wanted to ask me that.

I still couldn't bring myself to tell her I had a girlfriend, so I made up another story about having to take care of something at school. I received my lunch money from her in person for the first time in a while and then set off for school.

As I was heading out the door, mom called out to me.

"On Saturday, it looks like your father and I can both have dinner with you. On Sunday, though, we're both heading off in the morning on business trips, so I'm afraid you'll have to eat by yourself."

“Yeah, that’s fine. Okay, I’m off.”

“Stay safe.”

After bidding my mom a morning farewell for the first time in a while, I made my way to the designated meeting spot. Nanami-san and I had planned to meet at around 7:30, but I was trying to get there with thirty minutes to spare.

Yesterday, she and I had talked about our timing and both decided that we should stop arriving a whole hour before we were supposed to meet up. Getting sick from lack of sleep would defeat the purpose of meeting up in the first place.

So today, I made my way with the intention of arriving thirty minutes early. When I finally arrived, it seemed I was the first one there.

“Good. I won’t have to keep her waiting.”

“Too bad, I’m already here.”

Shocked to hear the voice behind me, I spun around to see the grinning Nanami-san. Her hairstyle today was a variation on the braided look from the day before, with the addition of a side ponytail. I was pretty sure that was also one of the hairstyles the character in my profile pic wore. The fact that she’d bothered to make such a change honestly kind of flattered me.

“Morning, Yoshin. You’re so early. I was all prepared to surprise you by getting here before you and then complain that you were late.”

She’d been thinking something that cute? No, no, more importantly, why had she been trying to surprise me?

When I asked her, she told me it was in return for me surprising her the day before. I supposed I did poke her cheek yesterday, so that kinda made sense.

That aside, I had more important things to say to her, which I knew the moment I met Nanami-san’s somewhat expectant eyes. I steeled myself.

“Good morning, Nanami-san. That’s a nice hairstyle. It looks super pr...pr...pr-pretty on you.”

I said it. I was finally able to say it. The word hadn’t come out that smoothly, but judging by Nanami-san’s satisfied expression, it seemed my response was

correct.

“Thanks. In that case, I present to you the privileges of holding my hand on our way to school and enjoying another bento I made for you.”

“I am humbled and grateful...”

The delightful grin on Nanami-san’s face told me she was satisfied with my response. I couldn’t say for sure, but her manner today made her seem more at ease.

Actually, maybe this wasn’t her at ease. Maybe she was excited about something. Had something good happened to her? Well, as long as she was having fun, I supposed it was all good. I was happy too.

With our greetings out of the way, we took each other’s hand and continued on our way to school.

There were way more people around than yesterday, but fewer of them were giving us strange looks. Did everyone already know? I sure hoped nothing weird would happen.

“Oh, Nanami-san, I’d meant to say before, but I’m sorry for being so abrupt yesterday.”

Confused, she placed a finger on her cheek and tilted her head. Her cute gesture had me a little bit—no, *very* flustered.

“Why are you apologizing?” she asked.

“Well, I mean, you’re not so used to guys, right? I asked you out in the heat of the moment, so I felt bad that maybe I’d scared you.”

Nanami-san moved her finger from her cheek to her lips. Her gesture, which had a hint of sexiness to it, seemed to captivate some of the male students walking by.

“Hush, it’s okay. It’s true that I’m not used to guys, and they are a little scary, but I was happy that you asked me out. Yeah, I was really happy,” she said with a shy smile.

Could it be that the reason she’d seemed so excited this morning was because I’d asked her out on a date? Was I allowed to be just a little bit full of myself

here? If so, that alone would make me feel like I'd been redeemed.

"Wait a minute... Did I tell you that?"

It was then that I realized my mistake.

She hadn't told me that she wasn't used to guys. I'd discovered that shred of information by accident on that fateful day. It was really hard for me to tell her that I'd overheard them talking about their dare—as in, I absolutely couldn't tell her.

"Oh, right. I mean, you mentioned yesterday that it was your first time dating someone. With you being this pretty and all, I thought the only reason that could happen was that you don't hang around guys much. It seems I guessed right, huh?"

Despite my attempts to fake my composure, I was talking way faster than usual. Just thinking she was pretty was embarrassing enough, never mind telling her again to save my skin. Somehow, though, I seemed to get away with it.

"Pretty..." Nanami-san mumbled, turning red in the face.

Yeah, I definitely got away with it. But why isn't Nanami-san good with guys? With her being this cute and all, you'd think she could juggle guys however she wanted. I wonder if she had some kind of bad experience in the past.

If so, then hopefully she can get more comfortable around them by practicing with me. It's not like all guys are weird—not that I can say with confidence that I'm not a weird guy.

"Oh, don't worry. It's not like there's some serious reason for it. It's just me. I get a little scared, and stuff like that."

She looked right at me and poked my cheek as if to reassure me. Was this payback for yesterday?

Nanami-san continued speaking as she poked my cheek some more. Had she taken a liking to the feel of it?

"When I was in elementary school, the boys used to pick on me a lot. It wasn't like I was afraid or super self-conscious around them or anything like that, but starting in sixth grade, that changed, and I started feeling really scared for some

reason.”

Those must have been classic instances of boys picking on girls that they liked. I bet Nanami-san was a cute kid too. But more importantly...

“How did you know what I was thinking?” I asked, slightly bemused.

“It’s only been three days, but I *am* your girlfriend.”

Beaming with pride, she puffed out her chest, and I had to touch my face to confirm. *Had I really given that much away?* If that was the case, I’d have to be more careful, or else she’d find out I knew about the dare.

But somehow, when she thrust out her chest that way, it was kind of awe-inspiring. Her thin button-down shirt drew my eyes, which were met with a bombardment of jiggles. That sight alone was enough to recharge my energy levels for the whole day.

Of course, she noticed my gaze immediately and twisted to the side, using one hand to cover her cleavage. *Shoot, there’s no way she’s okay with that. I have to apologize,* I thought.

“...Pervert.”



The destructive force of that single word, spoken with half-closed eyes and blushing cheeks, was tremendous. In near agony, I apologized to her harder and faster than I'd ever apologized in my life, but I never could have predicted that putting me in even more agony.

"I don't like guys looking at me like that, but it's you, so I forgive you."

I stared at her, dumbfounded. *That's totally against the rules, Nanami-san! How can you tell me I can stare when other guys aren't allowed? Just how much do you want me to suffer?*

Restraining my body as it tried to move in weird ways, I somehow made it to the classroom. I wasn't bombarded by questions today, but once again Nanami-san was whisked away by Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san.

Are they checking up on how the dare is going? I wished I could tell them not to worry and that Nanami-san was doing perfectly well.

Soon after, with their conversation seemingly finished, Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san returned to the classroom grinning ear to ear. Nanami-san accompanied them, her face a new shade of red. Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san were also directing their grins at me. *I wonder what they were talking about...*

Class proceeded without a hitch, and before long, it was time for lunch—the lunch hour I'd been waiting for.

To think I would actually look forward to lunchtime... I was getting all emotional when I really shouldn't have been letting my guard down.

That's when the incident happened.

Nanami-san smiled giddily and handed me my blue bento box. It was the very same bento box we'd purchased the day before.

Slowly and carefully, I opened the lid and was moved by what was inside. There was a vibrant yellow omelet and fragrant sausage that had been slightly charred. They were accompanied by a stir-fry of spinach and carrots, with two large hamburger steaks for the main dish. It was a bento that embodied happiness. Of course, I took multiple photos to commemorate the occasion.

“Is it enough?” Nanami-san asked worriedly.

“It’s more than enough. Thanks, Nanami-san. It looks delicious today too.”

“Oh, good. But if that’s the case, I won’t be able to feed you myself when you run out of food.”

My face flushed as I remembered the incident from the day before. I couldn’t have been the only one, though, since Nanami-san was blushing as well. She must have intended to tease me, but that teasing had blown up in her face.

“Sorry, forget what I said,” she mumbled.

As we continued chatting and eating our lunches, a large shadow suddenly loomed over us.

“Excuse me, Nanami-kun. May I have a word?”

“I’m eating lunch with my boyfriend, so no, Shibetsu-senpai.”

The shadow was that of some dude: a tall, handsome dude that was standing before us. He really was tall and looked even more so since we were sitting down. What was he, close to 190 centimeters? Even though he wasn’t doing anything, just standing there in front of us, he was quite intimidating...and a little bit scary.

Nanami-san and I were about the same height. Even I, a guy, was scared of this dude, so she had to be even more scared.

I scooted closer to Nanami-san, leaning into her a little. Then, pretending not to see her surprised expression, I continued to face forward and pointed to the seat next to me on the other side.

“I shouldn’t keep you standing there, senpai. There’s space here next to me if you’d like to sit down. I’m almost done eating my lunch, so would you mind waiting just a minute?”

“Hmm... And you are?”

“Yoshin Misumai, Nanami-san’s boyfriend.”

At my response, Shibetsu-senpai’s face twitched. He hesitated for a moment, but after a single glance at Nanami-san—who was refusing to even look at him

—he obediently sat down next to me.

“Wow, Nanami-san, this hamburger steak is absolute perfection. Once, I helped out with making dinner because I felt like it, but when I cut into it, the middle was raw. I ended up having to split it in two and cook it again, so it got all dry inside.”

“I didn’t do anything fancy. It’s large, but it’s not that thick, see? Other than that, as long as you watch the temperature and try steaming it a bit, anyone can do it.”

“This omelet is just as pristine. The sweetness is spot on.”

“Really? I’m so glad. My dad likes omelets made with soup stock, but everyone else at home likes the sweet ones, so it’s always such a pain to have to make two different kinds.”

“You make a different omelet just for your dad? You’re so considerate, Nanami-san.”

“Oh, stop it...”

I’d only given her my honest opinion, but Nanami-san pouted and looked the other way. Seriously, she was such a kind girl. Charmed by her reaction, I couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but... Misumai-kun, was it? May I ask you something?”

“Yes, senpai?”

Shibetsu-senpai, who had abruptly cut in on the conversation, was staring down at my bento. There wasn’t much left—just the omelet and a small slice of hamburger steak—but maybe he hadn’t eaten lunch yet.

“Did Nanami-kun make that for you, by any chance?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, that’s right.”

At my response, Shibetsu-senpai’s eyes widened as far as they would go. He looked back and forth between my bento and Nanami-san, who seemed annoyed by the abrupt interruption.

I had a bad feeling about this, so I shoved the remaining morsels into my

mouth, paying absolutely no mind to Shibetsu-senpai.

“Aw, dammit. I wanted some...”

Just as I thought. I was correct to have eaten them before he could say anything—not that I would have given him anything even if he had asked. This was my bento. I wouldn’t part with a single piece.

“Thanks for the meal. It was delicious today as well.”

“You’re very welcome.”

After finishing our meal with the same exchange as yesterday, I handed my bento box to Nanami-san and turned toward Shibetsu-senpai. I’d turned in such a way as to position myself in front of Nanami-san as if trying to shield her from his imposing figure.

“So, senpai, what did you want to talk to us about?”

“Actually, the one I wanted to speak with was Nanami-kun, but... Well, I suppose it concerns you as well.”

“Me too?”

Shibetsu-senpai stood up from the bench and moved back in front of us, his eyes flickering between Nanami-san and me. Then, crossing his arms with a grumpy expression, he began to address Nanami-san, all the while stealing glances at me.

“Nanami-kun, are you saying that you prefer this guy over me?”

She glared at him. “Yes,” she said matter-of-factly. “And senpai, please call me by my last name. The only person allowed to call me ‘Nanami’ is my boyfriend, Yoshin.”

Shibetsu-senpai, trembling and turning red in the face, pointed at me in anger. “I challenge you to a match, Misumai-kun!” he roared from the pit of his stomach. His voice was so booming—as befitting of an athlete—that everyone turned to look. “If I lose, I’ll acknowledge your relationship! But if I win, Nanami-kun is mine!”

“Uh, no thank you.”

I had refused so quickly that Shibetsu-senpai froze in place with his finger still pointed at me. *Why in the world did he think I'd accept such a pointless challenge?*

"Oh, Yoshin, there's some rice on your cheek."

"Huh?"

With that, Nanami-san picked off the rice grain and proceeded to put it in her mouth as if to show off the gesture to Shibetsu-senpai.

The unexpected act froze me in place with Shibetsu-senpai. Seeing me so stiff, Nanami-san laughed, a little embarrassed.

Shibetsu-senpai was the first one to release himself from his frozen state.

"How... How shameful that you would refuse a challenge! As I thought, you're a coward unworthy of Nanami-kun! If you wish to prove otherwise, accept the challenge!"

Thawed by Shibetsu-senpai's screaming, I, too, was able to move again. My concern wasn't directed toward my upperclassman, though, but toward Nanami-san.

What are you doing all of a sudden, Nanami-san?! If you're gonna turn all red and look the other way, you shouldn't have even done it! Ah, but you're still so cute!

Okay, Nanami-san's refusing to look this way, so I should probably attend to senpai to calm myself.

"Senpai, this isn't some kind of manga or old-fashioned TV drama where you can wager your girlfriend in a battle. Besides, we need to consider Nanami-san's feelings. Given that she's already rejected you once, ignoring her and choosing to fight me is totally meaningless."

"Don't you dare use those sound arguments on me!" Shibetsu-senpai screamed, covering his ears dramatically. "Logic can hurt people more than insults can! I know that better than anyone!"

So he knew I was right, huh? What a selfish guy.

I was pretty sure this was Shoichi Shibetsu-senpai. Even I knew him, given that

Mr. Oh-So-Handsome, captain of the basketball team, had been introduced at a previous school assembly. Apparently, he was nationally famous as a high school basketball player, though he was also one of the handsome guys Nanami-san had rejected.

He had probably heard that I'd started going out with her, and, acting like the jock that he was, he had come to challenge me to a fight. Though I appreciated his effort, there was nothing in it for me.

Whether this guy acknowledged it or not, I was the one going out with Nanami-san. What's more, I had zero intention of handing her over to someone who treated her like a prize. Even if we would only be dating for a limited time, at this moment, Nanami-san was still my girlfriend. Besides, I had to get Nanami-san to like me, so I had no time to waste on superfluous matters.

Just to reiterate, there was absolutely no reason for me to accept this challenge. I mean, I had more to lose, so any normal person would have refused too. Why on earth did he think I'd say yes? This guy...

"Yoshin, let's go already."

"Sounds good."

When Nanami-san—whose previously flushed face had finally returned to normal—and I started making our way back to our classroom, Shibetsu-senpai yelled after us indignantly.

"Hey! Wait a minute! Nanami-kun, just what do you see in such a plain and scrawny guy?! At the very least, I'm better looking than he is!"

I had nothing to say to that. It was true. This guy *was* very good-looking. He was also tall and could pass for a model. To say that I was plain and scrawny wasn't an insult, but rather a straightforward expression of fact. If the two of us stood side by side, ten out of ten people would choose him over me. That's just how hopelessly stark the difference between us was. That considered, I couldn't even be angry at what he was saying.

But Nanami-san was absolutely furious.

"If you insult Yoshin one more time, I'm going to sever all ties with you even as a friend! I'll ignore you even if you talk to me at school! Yoshin is way, way

more attractive than you! I hate people who say things like that!”

I had never seen her expression so full of anger—it was such a sudden change from her smile just a moment ago. Actually, had anyone seen her get angry before now? And it was all for my sake. Was it shallow of me to feel happy about her getting angry on my behalf?

But whoa, Shibetsu-senpai crumpled to his knees. Because he was tall, a dull sound reverberated around us, suggesting more serious damage had been done to his knees than a normal person would have experienced.

“H-Hate? She hates me?! Nanami-kun said she *hates* me...”

Wait, aren't you being a bit too mentally weak there, senpai?! Or did what Nanami-san said really have that effect on you?

“Even when you asked me out, you kept staring at my chest the whole time! Don't think I didn't notice! Yoshin would ne—”

With that, Nanami-san stopped midsentence. She was probably remembering my earlier slipup. *I'm sorry, Nanami-san!*

As I was apologizing to her in my head, though...

“Yoshin would never do something like that!”

Did she just totally lie?! Nanami-san was pretending the incident from this morning had never happened as she rebuked him with a barefaced lie. Then, as Shibetsu-senpai slammed his palms against the ground in hopelessness, she glanced over at me and stuck out her tongue like a mischievous child.

Was that look because of the lie she'd told or an adorable protest against me looking at her chest?

Even if she had already forgiven me, I felt bad for having done that to her. But it couldn't be helped—people's eyes were drawn to things that move.

As Nanami-san began to walk away, Shibetsu-senpai was about to raise his eyes as if to cling to her with his puppy-dog expression. Suspecting trouble, I rushed to insert myself between the two of them, kneeling so that he and I were at eye level.

“Nanami-san, it's probably a bit much to sever all ties with him,” I said. “I

mean, you're friends, right? I feel a little uneasy that you have such a handsome guy friend, and to be honest, I'm a little jealous. He's not someone I'm comfortable with you getting involved with. But it'd be a little harsh on Shibetsu-senpai to sever *all* ties with him."

"Misumai-kun..."

Shibetsu-senpai shifted his gaze to me, tears streaming down his face. *Okay, good. Senpai is looking at me.* Had the dude raised his head before my intervention, he would have been looking right up Nanami-san's skirt. Even I hadn't seen up there bef— No, wait.

At the very least, I was relieved that Nanami-san didn't have to experience the embarrassment of having someone look up her skirt.

"If you say so. I guess I won't sever all ties with him then. Oh, but I haven't given him my number or anything, so don't worry too much, okay?"

Nanami-san pouted as if she was sulking a bit. Had she not liked that I'd stuck up for him? Hmm... In times like these, what was the best thing to say? I didn't exactly have a way with words. For now, I decided to pay her genuine praise.

"Right. Thanks, Nanami-san. You really are too kind. I'm relieved to hear about the number thing too."

"Did you fall for me all over again?"

Switching her sulk to a radiant smile, she tilted her head and flashed her perfect teeth, making me feel like I'd been hit with a counterpunch. That it didn't hurt was a mystery to me, but how was I supposed to respond this time?

I figured I should just speak honestly.

"Yes, I've fallen hard."

Just as I had made up my mind, Shibetsu-senpai stood up.

"Hmph, it seems you're not so bad," he grumbled, having recovered enough to speak. "I suppose I can acknowledge that at least, but I still don't recognize this relationship. Take on my challenge, and prove to me that you're a worthy man."

I raised my gaze and heaved a heavy sigh. It seemed that Nanami-san felt

exactly the same way, since our sighs were in perfect harmony. *Dang, there goes my chance to say something smooth to Nanami-san...*

“And? When you say challenge, just what do you have in mind?”

“A three-point contest. I’m the captain of the basketball team. Ten-shot matches are a bit of a club tradition, you see.”

Whoa, that’s playing dirty, dude. The captain of the basketball team shouldn’t be challenging people to anything related to basketball. I’d only ever played basketball during class, so my only knowledge about it came from manga.

Nanami-san was also staring at him, both exasperated and in shock. She probably hadn’t thought he would suggest something this dumb either. Still, he wasn’t backing down, so I guess it couldn’t be helped. I didn’t want him to come back to bother us the next day too.

“All right, senpai, I’ll accept the challenge, but only on three conditions. I’m completely inexperienced at basketball, so that should be allowed, right?”

“Hm? Well, okay then. You name it. I’ll give you as many handicaps as you’d like.”

In that case, I’d like you not to challenge people in your area of expertise. Saying that aloud, though, would be wasted on this person.

In all likelihood, this guy was stupid—very stupid. He was an upperclassman, so I didn’t really want to say it, but he was dumb as rocks. That was why he’d accepted my conditions before he’d even heard what they were. That said, he was probably confident he wouldn’t lose, given that he was on the basketball team.

At any rate, I had his word.

“First, please show me ten—no, *twenty* of your shots as examples. And please let me go first for the actual contest.”

“All right, that should be fine.”

“Second, if I score even once, please consider it my victory. After all, I’ve never made a three-pointer before. And for you... How about if you make eight, we call it your victory?”

“Deal. That’s a pretty fair handicap.”

“Third and lastly, regardless of the results of our contest, Nanami-san must choose the winner herself.”

“But of course! Now, let’s have me make all ten splendid shots and have her choose me!”

Shibetsu-senpai, now completely recovered, smiled brightly and left the premises with steps too light for his huge physique. He was probably heading to the gymnasium.

There was still time left before the end of lunch, so it was probably best to settle this now. My time with Nanami-san would be cut short for today, but that couldn’t be helped.

“Yoshin, are you sure? This is Shibetsu-senpai you’re facing.”

“Oh, yeah. It’ll be fine. How do I say this...? I’m also kinda angry at him for treating you like a prize. Take this as an opportunity to kick back while watching my sorry excuse for a three-pointer.”

If Shibetsu-senpai’s three-pointers were going to be splendid, mine were going to be hapless, to say the least, but I had no intention of losing. Well, given those conditions, I didn’t think I was going to.

“But if you lose, I...” She trailed off, anxiously looking down at her feet, so I put my hand on her shoulder to reassure her. She trembled at my touch but then raised her face.

Shoot, I touched her without thinking. Is she okay?

Oh, but something about her expression makes her look more at ease... Wait, Nanami-san, why are you resting your cheek on my hand?



Wow, her cheek's really soft. She's rubbing up against me... No, I have to continue speaking.

"I asked for that condition, right? That no matter what happens, we'll have you decide the end result? Well, I guess I guess I have no chance if you're totally won over by Shibetsu-senpai's drop-dead gorgeous three-pointers, but that wouldn't happen, right?"

That wouldn't happen, right?

Nanami-san thought on my words for a moment, then clapped her hands together in realization. "Oooh, that's what that last one meant."

"Yeah, though it seems senpai only remembers the first thing he said, which was that he'd get to have you if he won. He's... I shouldn't say this, but he seems kinda dumb."

"Ah, yeah, though when it comes to basketball, he's pretty impressive."

"I see. Well, shall we head over to the gym?" I extended my hand toward her.

Though she was surprised, she slowly took it, and we made our way to the gym.

When we arrived, I couldn't help but bask in Shibetsu-senpai's envious glare. I knew my enjoyment was bad of me, but it probably wasn't *that* bad to scar him psychologically before we began.

Having dealt him a few wounds, I then took part in the three-point contest against my upperclassman—with the conditions I'd laid out, of course. He accepted my terms for the challenge without any tomfoolery, and as a result...

Shibetsu-senpai crumpled to his knees and slammed his palms against the ground at my feet, just as he had done mere minutes before.

"This... This can't be! How could I lose?"

"I win, senpai. Nanami-san is my girlfriend. You acknowledge that now, right?"

Although he seemed vexed, he wasn't the type to go back on his word. With a blank expression, he looked back and forth between Nanami-san and me,

before smiling somewhat nihilistically.

“Ah, yes, Misumai-kun and...Barato-kun... You two make a fine couple. Dammit, I’m disappointed in myself.”

In the end, Shibetsu-senpai flashed us a bright smile as befitting an athlete and spread his limbs out on the ground as congratulations.

Seeing his smile, I felt slightly ashamed for having used some dirty tricks, but given that he was the one who’d slapped me in the face with the basketball challenge, I figured we could call it even.

Shibetsu-senpai and I firmly shook hands as our makeshift audience burst into cheers.



Canyon: ...So there you have it, Baron-san.

The three-point contest had ended as well as it could have, and I was now back home reporting the day’s happenings to Baron-san.

Baron: Well, well, Canyon-kun, looks like someone had another event-filled day. Don’t tell me you’re actually quite the troublemaker.

Well, that was uncalled for. You know I’m just your typical high schooler.

But he was right about one thing—ever since I’d started dating Nanami-san, each day had been full of surprises. If someone were to tell me this a little while ago, I never would have believed them.

I was going out with one of the prettiest gyaru in school, all because of a dare. Maybe the fact that it *was* a dare was the only believable thing about all this. Still, the last few days had filled me with so much happiness, I’d be right not to believe.

Baron: I mean, the heat of the moment may have had something to do with it, but you’ve still managed to outdo yourself. Even if he did miss a few shots, you basically won against a guy up thirty to one. Or I guess, since they were three-pointers, I should say ninety to three. Aha ha, talk about a blowout.

Canyon: Well, I guess we were kind of swept away by the moment, plus he was willing to recognize that he'd lost.

Right... I'd technically won the contest against Shibetsu-senpai, but if the match had been judged on points alone, it would've been my complete and utter defeat. After all, I literally only made one shot.

Before our match, I'd asked him to show me twenty three-pointers in a row in the name of giving me a lesson. In actuality, me standing off to the side and having him demonstrate had been somewhat of a pretense. My true goal was to have him use up as much energy as possible before we began our challenge. I had even asked him to coach me a little, hoping it would make him break his stride.

As expected from the team captain, he'd been pretty decent at showing me the ropes. That had made me feel kind of bad, but at least I'd learned how to shoot the ball.

After that, I'd put all my energy into aiming my very first shot. I had concentrated harder than ever before, and somehow, I'd succeeded.

It had been a total fluke of a shot, but I could see the agitation in Shibetsu-senpai's eyes. To add insult to injury, Nanami-san had cheered zealously, which must've only rubbed salt into the wound. But it had made no difference to me. The shot had been nothing but that—a fluke—which meant I'd failed to make all nine remaining shots. The last one hadn't even reached the rim.

I mean, cut me some slack. I'd made just one shot, and Nanami-san had been screaming, "Oh my gawd! So cool! I'm in love!" How could I possibly keep it together?

Wait, now that I think about it, had she really said she was in love? Had I heard that right?

Regardless, in the moment I'd made that first shot, I'd met the condition for victory. The conditions had stated if I made even one shot, I would be named the winner.

By then, the odds had been in my favor. Ordinarily it would've been a tie at most. My only miscalculation had been that, despite his state of agitation,

Shibetsu-senpai had basically made all of his three-pointers. His own win condition had been to land at least eight, which he'd done with zero problems.

That he had been able to clear this condition, making a total of thirty three-pointers despite the perfect storm I'd created, was nothing short of astonishing. I had no experience with basketball, so I wasn't one to talk, but maybe those first twenty shots had just been a warm-up for him, with thirty being a piece of cake. Still, all I could say was that I'd underestimated the captain of the basketball team.

Thus, we'd been left with the score of eight against one. Normally, even if you'd taken into account the handicap, that would've been a draw at best. In fact, I'd felt a sense of defeat. But that feeling had been blown away by a single remark from Nanami-san.

"Yoshin wins!"

Despite both meeting our respective win conditions, my third and final request had been for Nanami-san to pick the winner. Sure, you could say the match had been fixed, but Shibetsu-senpai had respectfully accepted the outcome.

Baron: Seriously, it's so unfair. I mean, if you're letting your girlfriend decide in the end, then even if you'd made none of those shots, you'd come out the winner as long as she said so.

Canyon: Well, true. It was completely unfair.

Had she been completely taken by Shibetsu-senpai's magnetic moves, the result would have been the opposite, no matter the results. Not that I thought Nanami-san would become suddenly enamored by someone that she had once rejected, but one could never say for certain. Hey, I'm a guy, and even I couldn't help thinking Shibetsu-senpai's three-pointers were really amazing.

With my relationship with Nanami-san being a dare and all, I couldn't be sure what might happen next. I had, admittedly, been a little bit anxious. Thankfully, though, my worry had turned out to be for nothing.

Thinking back, Nanami-san's violent glomp after the match had ended had really been something else. It had been soft and warm and smelled so nice, and

because her uniform was always a bit on the revealing side, there'd been a *lot* of skin-on-skin contact.

After that had come her blushing face as she became embarrassed by her own gesture. Honestly, I don't think I'll ever be able to forget how that hug felt. After all, it was my first and only hug with a girl.

Baron: Hey, Canyon-kun, do you remember what I said at the beginning of all this?

Canyon: What you said at the beginning?

Stumped by Baron-san's sudden question, I wracked my brain trying to remember. What was the first thing he'd said to me? We had way too many daily conversations for me to figure it out. But since he was mentioning it at this particular moment...

Canyon: The thing you said about me getting her to like me?

Baron: Precisely. Gosh, you really are good at picking up on these things.

Canyon: It was one of the first things you said, so of course I'd remember.

I'd decided to go out with Nanami-san after listening to Baron-san's advice, and in my own way, I'd been making an effort to get her to like me, I think. But—how should I put it...?—unlike before, I did think I was being more careful about what I said and did. Was there something about that that concerned Baron-san?

Baron: Are you, by any chance, totally smitten with her yourself?

Seeing the message displayed on-screen, I felt my heartbeat hammer momentarily. His words were dead-on, as if he'd seen right through me.

Baron: Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. If you're starting to like her, that's actually a great thing.

Canyon: Do you really think so?

I thought for sure he'd reprimand me for falling for her at the tip of a hat. It wasn't that I'd expected him to scold me, but I had thought he might say something along those lines. On the contrary, what he said next came as a total shock.

Baron: For sure. I mean, no matter how you look at it, your girlfriend is head over heels for you, so if you like her too, that means it's a two-way thing. Bye-bye obstacles; bye-bye problems.

Canyon: Do you really think so? Do you really think she likes me?

Baron: Yeah. In fact, if she doesn't actually like you, I don't think I'll ever be able to trust another woman ever again.

Huh? We'd started dating on Tuesday, which meant we'd only been going out for three days at most. Was it even possible to achieve that kind of goal so quickly? But if that really were true, I'd be a little bit—no, I'd be *really* stoked.

Peach: I don't think that's the case at all. In fact, I'm absolutely certain she's toying with you.

While I'd been continuing my chat with Baron-san, Peach-san had suddenly barged into the conversation. I mean, this was just a group chat, so "barging in" doesn't really make sense, but her opinion made my head regain some sobriety.

Peach: Gyaruu do nothing but toy with guys and laugh about it behind their backs. Come on, didn't you say her friends were grinning at you? They must have been laughing because they thought you didn't know anything.

I couldn't tell what it was about her words, but just hearing them made my head feel cooler. Sure, I knew they were negative and overflowing with stereotypes, but Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san really had been grinning at me. That said...

Canyon: Peach-san, I appreciate you looking out for me, I really do, but I don't think she's a bad person. I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about her that way.

I hadn't really sensed any malice from those smiles. Besides, they'd already promised Nanami-san that they'd never reveal to me this was all a dare, so those grins must have been about something else.

Peach: I'm sorry. I'm just worried about you, so I...

Canyon: No, thank you. Really. Thanks to you, I was able to get a grip on myself. I'll work even harder from now on so that she'll like me.

She was right, really. It was only our third day of going out, so it was far too early for me to get so full of myself. Unless Nanami-san *was* super easy—so easy as to be considered the “Easy Heroine”—it probably made more sense to interpret her behavior as her performance of an “ideal girlfriend.”

Peach: I'm sorry. I'm logging out for today.

With that, Peach-san left the chat. Her words had been a little harsh, but she was probably just worried about me. Maybe she'd had some kind of bad experience in the past with gyaru.

Baron: I was worried for a moment that you might be disheartened, but I'm glad you took that in a positive way. I'm sorry, man. I don't think she means any harm by it.

With Peach-san gone, Baron-san had taken it upon himself to check that everything was all right. Truth be told, he was probably just as worried for me as she was, which was mostly likely why he hadn't reproached her. No doubt he would also follow up with her later. He really was a big help.

Canyon: I know. I'm not really that bothered by it. Besides, thanks to her, I'm thinking a little more clearly. I have to make even more of an effort to get Nanami-san to like me.

Baron: I really don't think you have to worry about that anymore, but it's not a bad thing to be proactive about stuff like this. An honest effort is never a bad thing.

Canyon: Speaking of which, what should I do, exactly?

Baron: Jeez, you'd be way cooler if you didn't rely on me for every little thing. I mean, everything I say is from the internet anyway, so shouldn't you just look this up yourself?

Baron-san always said his advice to me had been taken from the internet, but I couldn't help but wonder if that was true. Truth be told, I'd actually looked up a lot of things myself, but nothing had really spoken to me in the way his words did. Everything Baron-san said made perfect sense—like, everything was super convincing—which was why I always ended up relying on him for everything.

Baron: Well, who cares? Tomorrow, why don't you make sure she's okay after everything that happened today? She could be feeling uneasy about things, so you should make sure to comfort her.

Canyon: Uneasy? But I ended up winning, so I thought everything was fine.

Baron: Hmm... If anything, she's probably worried that there may be even more guys in the future who'll want to challenge you in similar ways.

Ah, I guess that was a possibility. That considered, had I been careless to accept Shibetsu-senpai's challenge in the first place?

Baron: This is only my guess based on what you've shared with me, but she might be worried that you're going to encounter more dangerous situations because of her. So, whether you lie or just put on a brave face, you'll have to reassure her that you're going to be fine.

Canyon: I see. You're absolutely right, thank you.

After the basketball challenge, Nanami-san and I had held hands on our way home from school, but if she had, in fact, been feeling anxious inside, I felt absolutely pathetic for having not picked up on that.

Baron: That said, the word that you went up against the captain of the basketball team is gonna have spread like wildfire, so you'll probably be fine for tomorrow. You can be as lovey-dovey with her as you want and talk about your date and stuff like that.

Canyon: That's true as well. We'll have to decide on what movie we're gonna watch.

Baron: Yeah, that sounds like a plan.

I still got nervous just seeing the word "date," but even that was starting to

feel reassuring. And if she really were feeling uneasy...yeah, I should think of something thoughtful to say to her. I couldn't rely on Baron-san for that. So, rather than focusing on my usual game, I began turning over in my head what I was going to say to her tomorrow.

As a side note, I ended up getting a whole bunch of messages from Nanami-san, which all turned out to be complimenting me. I was still feeling somewhat guilty for receiving compliments—knowing I'd won using such underhanded tactics and all—but all that went out the window when I saw her next message.

Nanami: Say, do you think that when I hugged you today, I should've kissed you on the cheek as a reward?

I mean, that would have made me feel over the moon, but if you'd done that then and there, I don't think my heart would have been able to take it, Nanami-san.



The next day, I was swiftly proved wrong to think that Shibetsu-senpai wouldn't return if I beat him, because at lunchtime, he showed up.

"Well, hello there, Misumai-kun and Barato-kun. You sure do make a fine couple. I envy you both. Would it be all right if I joined you for lunch?"

"No. I'd like you to leave me and my boyfriend alone."

"Um, you can sit next to me, senpai."

At Nanami-san's blatant rejection, Shibetsu-senpai's bright smile had dampened into the look of a dejected dog. I'd felt so bad seeing him like that that I'd caved in and offered him a seat. Switching back to his untroubled grin, he parked his ass beside me.

"Yoshin..." Nanami-san said to me.

"Well, you know, if you want, we can pretend like it's just the two of us here."

"Talk about a burn, Misumai-kun, especially given how touched I was by your kindness," Shibetsu-senpai said. Despite his supposed shock, he proceeded to open his bento box, which looked large enough to fit twice as much food as my

own.

When I peeked inside, I saw fried chicken, hamburger steak, grilled meat, fried pork cutlets. It was basically a smorgasbord of meats accompanied by thinly sliced cabbage. Even the amount of rice was no joke.

For the record, the main dish for my bento today was deep-fried shrimp. They were impressively large shrimp that looked good enough to be served at a restaurant.

Nanami-san hadn't asked me yesterday what I wanted for lunch, so I'd been looking forward to seeing what she came up with—but this exceeded even my expectations. The excitement I felt every time I opened the bento box made me feel like a kid again.

“At home, we make deep-fried shrimp whenever there's something to celebrate, so this is for yesterday's victory.”

Ah, so that was why she hadn't asked me what I wanted. The guy who'd lost was sitting right next to me, but never mind that for now.

“Actually, Misumai-kun, I wanted to speak with *you* today,” he said.

“Huh? Um, then is it okay if we talk after I finish eating?”

“That's no problem. But...I was also wondering if you would be willing to swap one of your omelets with a slice of my pork cutlet.”

“I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I have to refuse.”

That had been an immediate answer on my part. Like, as if I'd do something like that. I couldn't even conceive of trading the lunch Nanami-san had made for me with anyone else's. Perhaps Shibetsu-senpai'd had an inkling before he'd even asked, but that didn't stop him looking kind of down.

“What exactly did you come here to do, senpai?” Nanami-san asked, frustrated at his intrusion but slightly heartened by my rejection of his trade.

He looked up and smiled at her wryly. “Ah, Barato-kun, I'm sorry to bother the two of you. As I said earlier, there's something I want to speak with Misumai-kun about.”

Since our match yesterday, Shibetsu-senpai had transitioned from calling

Nanami-san “Nanami-kun” to “Barato-kun” instead. I supposed it was his way of closing the book on our challenge, as well as demonstrating that he’d given up on her. I only wished he’d shown that willingness sooner.

“What is it you wanted to talk to me about? Yesterday’s match is over, so we can’t possibly have anything more to discuss.”

“Come now, don’t be such a stranger. To be frank, I was wondering if you’d like to be friends with me. I came here to ask about exchanging contact information.”

What? How in the world did we get here?

“I have nothing but respect for you for beating me, the captain of the basketball team—all handicaps aside. You are, in fact, a man worthy of Nanami-kun, so I want to be friends with you.”

I’d just pulled the world’s most shady tricks, yet Shibetsu-senpai seemed to have taken it all as the legitimate outcome to our match. Hmm... For better or for worse, this guy sure was pure at heart. My conscience stung just a little.

“And besides,” he said, “if I become friends with you, I may one day be able to make friends with Barato-kun as well.”

I take back what I said about my conscience stinging. Rather, this guy was really obtuse for saying something like that so openly to me. I didn’t want to say it to his face, but despite being a tall, handsome captain of the basketball team, he was turning out to be quite the dumb sidekick.

Just then, I heard a whisper in my ear. The gentle breath that caressed my ear with each word sent a shiver through me, different to fear or surprise.

“Shibetsu-senpai is only really good at basketball. Everything else about him is a little unfortunate, but that tickles some girls’ maternal sides.”

What is this? What is this tingling sensation?!

I almost dropped my lunch but just barely hung on. Jeez, this was getting dangerous. To think that hearing her voice directly in my ear would have an even greater destructive force than hearing it over the phone...

The tingling I felt as her breath brushed my ear was addicting, to say the least.

The sensation lingered along my spine. Talk about another new discovery.

There I was, stunned by amazement while Nanami-san continued like she hadn't noticed a thing. Not having the guts to bring my lips closer to her ear, I responded to her in a whisper.

"Speaking of which, didn't your maternal instincts kick in at all?" I asked.

But Nanami-san was much braver than I was.

"Not at all," she said quietly, her lips millimeters from my ear. "He just kept looking at my chest the whole time he was confessing, and it was in this sleazy way too. There was no way I'd feel anything maternal after *that*."

Those were some harsh words. She'd laughed and forgiven me that time she'd caught me looking, so why was she so strict now?

That aside, Shibetsu-senpai's stupidity was part of what allowed me to go out with Nanami-san now, so I did owe him somewhat. I looked back at Nanami-san once more and felt my sense of gratitude deepening toward Shibetsu-senpai.

"So, Misumai-kun, what do you say? Will you be friends with me?"

"Um, sure. I'd be happy to. But I'm not giving you Nanami-san."

"That I already know. I know my challenge yesterday was really ungentlemanly, but I'll move on to finding my next love."

Find his next love? Did that mean he still had lingering feelings for Nanami-san? Still, perhaps this dude was trying to get over those feelings and was maybe trying to establish a friendship with me as a way of doing so. It was very sportsmanlike, or perhaps even manly of him. It was certainly a commendable quality that I myself was lacking.

After that, Shibetsu-senpai and I exchanged contact info. My profile icon was still of that game character, but Nanami-san hadn't minded, so I'd decided to leave it. Shibetsu-senpai's profile icon was of a basketball.

"Well then, I've accomplished my task, so I'll skedaddle. Oh, and Misumai-kun, would you be interested in joining the basketball team?"

"Of course not. If I did, I'd have less time to spend with Nanami-san."

That was a line I'd heard from some TV show or other. I really did mean it, but I also didn't really jibe with athlete types. There was no way I was going to join a sports team. I felt bad for using Nanami-san as an excuse, but a quick glance at her with her delighted smile told me that she hadn't really minded.

"Is that so? Well, I envy you. If anything comes up, feel free to hit me up. I'm always around if you need me. I can't pick up all the time 'cause of basketball, but that doesn't mean we can't hang out."

"Thanks. I'll let you know."

With that, Shibetsu-senpai sauntered away, a carefree smile slapped on his face. How should I put it...? My first impression of him hadn't been the best, but maybe he wasn't such a bad guy after all. Or was I too easily fooled?

A few female students left the rooftop as if to follow Shibetsu-senpai. It could be that his search for love wouldn't be a terribly long one.

After seeing him off, Nanami-san and I returned to our lunch.

"Gawd, we can finally be alone! Though maybe you should start eating lunch with Shibetsu-senpai instead, huh?"

Alone... I guess we were, though there were still people around us on the rooftop. Still, Nanami-san seemed slightly upset.

It probably didn't feel so good to have your boyfriend become friendly with a guy you'd rejected. In that sense, my actions had been wholly inconsiderate. At the same time, though, it was somehow difficult to dislike Shibetsu-senpai. Perhaps he played his upperclassman role well, or perhaps the shonen manga—like competition had nurtured a kind of camaraderie within me.

"I'm sorry, Nanami-san. Did I make you anxious?"

"It's not like I'm insecure or anything, but I guess it's not that fun when you're only noticing Shibetsu-senpai." She pouted and looked the other way.

How could she say such a cute thing? But somehow I saw a tinge of worry in her eyes as she looked at me. Maybe it was just my imagination, but perhaps this was the perfect time to say the line I'd come up with yesterday.

Wait, was I actually going to say it? Even though I had come up with it myself,

honestly, it was a little—no, *very* embarrassing. But, no, if I were going to say it, it had to be now or never.

“Don’t worry, Nanami-san. Even if someone else comes along and tries to take you away from me like you were some kind of prize, I...I won’t let you go no matter what.”

Gaaah... That was way too lame! Oh shoot, I’m getting shivers up my spine. No, stay calm! At least keep it cool until you hear her reaction. Stay strong!

Right then, I heard Nanami-san’s voice.

“Yoshin...” she whispered. And then... “Pfft...”

...she burst out laughing.

“Aha ha ha ha! Jeez! What’s with that? That sounded way too cool! Seriously, you’re so much cooler than Shibetsu-senpai. But, come on, aren’t you trying too hard?! Look at your face! It’s all red!”

I raised my hand to my cheek, and sure enough, my face was hot to the touch. Having it pointed out only made me turn even redder.

When I finally glanced at her, I realized that her ears had turned red too.

“I’m not the only one, Nanami-san. Were you that happy about what I said?”

“Of course! Is there any girl out there who wouldn’t be happy hearing such a cool thing from her boyfriend?”

Agh, another counterattack. I had zero chance of winning at this rate. As we sat there next to each other eating our lunches, my face remained red, along with her ears. I was still busy wondering if I’d misjudged the timing when Nanami-san poked me in my side.

“I think I made too much food for myself. Do you want some?”

She talked stiltedly, as if reading from a script, as she brought one of the pieces of omelet from her bento toward my face. It was the omelet that had been a particular favorite of mine. She held it up with her chopsticks deliberately and brought it closer to my mouth.

“I thought you weren’t gonna feed me anymore because we bought a bigger

bento box?”

“Huh? Well, it can’t be helped. I’m already full, and it’s a shame to waste food, right?”

True, if she was full, it couldn’t be helped.

I leaned forward and accepted the piece of omelet. The taste of happiness softly spread through my mouth. I was pretty sure this was her way of thanking me for what I’d said to her. For that alone, it was worth all the embarrassment. I’d never been happier.

After that, I finished my lunch and passed Nanami-san the bento box...to find her snuggling under my arm and leaning her weight on me. That weight felt overwhelmingly comfortable, but the stares of our peers were a little embarrassing.

“Nanami-san, what are you doing?”

“I guess it’s a reward for saying something so cool. For today, why don’t we sit like this and chat until lunch is over?”

“What about your friends?”

“Those two were saying stuff about giving their own handmade bentos to their boyfriends, so they’re probably off campus again.”

“Their boyfriends are a mystery too. Well then, in that case, let’s stay like this for a bit, shall we?”

“Mm-hmm!”

Seeing her smile as she pressed up against me, I was glad that I’d said what I had.

“Yoshin, you’re warm. I feel all toasty when I’m near you like this.”

“You’re warm too, Nanami-san. It’s a nice day today, so it feels good out here, doesn’t it?”

And just like that, our lunch hour passed by peacefully.

Later, school was abuzz about the guy on the rooftop who’d said something so embarrassing with a straight face. I would come to regret my words just a

tad, but that was a story for another day.

Interlude: Her Bold Actions and Their Result

Did I overdo it? I asked myself as I lay on my bed.

I couldn't help but blush when I thought about it, since I felt like I'd gotten a little mean when Shibetsu-senpai had interrupted my precious lunch break with Yoshin. After all, I'd been feeling all warm and fuzzy until Shibetsu-senpai had cropped up to ruin it.

What did he mean when he said he wouldn't acknowledge Yoshin? He did take it back in the end, but still...

Remembering how Shibetsu-senpai had addressed me, I began to feel irritated again. Even Yoshin was still being polite with me by calling me "Nanami-san," and yet Shibetsu-senpai had been throwing around "Nanami-kun" as if we were close or something.

I mean, I knew he wasn't a bad person at heart—I understood that—but I just didn't feel comfortable around him. That was why I'd acted the way I had, making a show of my relationship with Yoshin. I felt kinda bad about it.

I'd done lots of things, like picking a rice grain off of Yoshin's cheek and eating it, and pressing my body against his. Well, maybe eating the rice grain *had* been a bit much.

Half of that had been me showing off to Shibetsu-senpai, but the other had been me making an effort to be a little more proactive, given that Yoshin often seemingly swapped between his quiet nature and his own tendency to be pretty proactive himself. I had no regrets about that.

Thinking back, I was pretty thrilled that Shibetsu-senpai said Yoshin and I made a good couple. A remark like that would make me happy no matter who said it, but...

"A good couple... He said we're a good couple. Are we a good couple?"

All alone in my room, I muttered to no one in particular as I stared up at my ceiling. Of course, no answer came. I could only bring myself to utter those

words precisely *because* there would be no answer.

Was Yoshin also happy that Shibetsu-senpai had called us a good couple? I was curious to know, but I couldn't ask him outright.

And while I'd been happy to hear those words, they also kind of pained me. Was I really, truly happy, from the bottom of my heart? Sure, I was elated, but considering I was still lying about things, I was beginning to feel unsure of my own feelings.

This all meant I was lying not only to Yoshin, but to Shibetsu-senpai as well. If Shibetsu-senpai found out that the relationship between Yoshin and me was based on a dare, what would he even think? I really was the worst.

Overwhelmed, I sighed and undid the top button of my pajama shirt. I was breathing heavily, but my small act didn't change anything. Of course it wouldn't. The heaviness I was feeling was in my heart. Loosening my clothes wouldn't fix that.

"Come to think of it, Yoshin didn't react at all when I asked about kissing him on the cheek."

I'd been so worked up about Yoshin's victory in the basketball challenge that I'd ended up texting him to ask him myself—but Yoshin's reaction had been as calm as ever.

Yoshin: That would've been really flattering, though maybe also a little embarrassing.

That was the only reply he'd sent back after my own was marked as read. Here I'd been, making so much noise over sending a single message that my mom had yelled at me again, but he'd replied as cool as a cucumber. I had thought that maybe he'd bring up the topic of a reward for winning, but he didn't do that either. I was wondering if I'd kiss him on the cheek today.

Then again, maybe he would be bothered by it. Maybe he didn't like doing that kind of stuff at all. Shibetsu-senpai had intruded before I could find out.

No, that couldn't be it. He'd said that amazingly cool thing in front of everyone, making my heart throb and my body burn with embarrassment. It

just didn't make any sense for him to hate public displays of affection.

Ugh, my face was growing hot just thinking about it. Seriously, why did he always have to say things that made me feel so happy?

I'd been so joyous in that moment that I couldn't help cuddling up to him. I can't remember what we'd talked about, but I do remember the warmth of his body. I don't even know why I'd done something like that—I'd simply felt this urge to stay close to him. It was the first time I'd ever felt that way.

Yoshin was not only warm and kind, but he treated me like I was important to him. Being in a relationship with such a person filled me with happiness, but in my moments alone, that happiness was replaced by guilt. There was no better way to shake off that guilt and loneliness than to text with Yoshin every night.

We would chat about mundane things—things we couldn't talk about at school or plans for the next day. *Ah, that's right. I won't be able to see Yoshin tomorrow.* I was going to go watch a movie with Hatsumi and Ayumi, a movie I'd been wanting to see for a while, but realizing I wouldn't be able to see Yoshin that day, I suddenly felt kind of lonely.

Maybe I can send him lots of messages, at least.

Before, I could only enjoy romance through movies and other media, so I never even dreamed that I would find my own romantic relationship in real life.

"I wonder if tomorrow's movie will give me any ideas about advancing my relationship with Yoshin."

I felt giddy at the thought of seeing this movie in a new light. I wouldn't be able to see Yoshin tomorrow, but I could at least take this as an opportunity to learn a lot for him.

"Oh, a message!"

Yoshin and I had been chatting until just a little while ago, but I'd just received a new message from him. *Didn't he say he was going to be up late gaming?*

I read his message and couldn't help but smile.

Yoshin: Enjoy your movie tomorrow, Nanami-san. I'm sad that I can't see you, but I'm looking forward to Sunday.

The message was somewhat stiff, but it nonetheless suggested that he'd thought about me in his own way. Just from looking at it, I felt the negative emotions inside of me melt away.

Nanami: Thanks. I'm looking forward to Sunday too. I'll send you lots of messages tomorrow.

I clicked send, crawled into bed, and closed my eyes to get a good night's sleep.

I only hoped there weren't going to be *that* many adult scenes in this movie. With that thought in mind, I drifted off with my heart slightly lighter than before.

Chapter 4: Our First Date

It was Saturday.

A day with no school and no plans, just like every other Saturday. A day when I can focus fully on my game from morning to night. Usually, Saturday vied with Sunday for the spot of my most awaited day of the week.

“Usually” being the key word here.

On a normal Saturday, I’d jump on my game the moment I woke up, but today I just couldn’t get into it. I was feeling...off. I couldn’t concentrate and kept wanting to do something else.

My date with Nanami-san is tomorrow. She should be going to the movies with her two friends today. Maybe making her go to the movies two days in a row was a bad move.

As I continued playing, completely distracted, my party was completely annihilated. I’d screwed up and gotten us all killed.

Baron: Whoa, it’s rare to see you so utterly destroyed, Canyon-kun. Is your mind somewhere else, perhaps?

Peach: Is something wrong?

To Peach-san and Baron-san, my distraction was cause for concern. I’d been playing this game far too long to make such a silly mistake. I was so far gone, I couldn’t even play right. I knew the reason, of course.

Canyon: I’m going on that date with Nanami-san tomorrow. It’s our first date, so I can’t seem to stop thinking about it.

In terms of preparations for tomorrow, I was all set...I supposed. I’d already bought tickets online and chosen the seats, but although at first we’d

considered meeting up at the movie theater, I'd suggested that we not do that.

After what had happened with Shibetsu-senpai, I couldn't help but worry that she'd be hit on by some weirdo. If someone as cute as her was standing around by herself, it was probably more rare to have a guy *not* hit on her. Well, not that I would do something like that, but there were certainly guys out there who would.

As I sat there worrying, she'd made an alternate suggestion.

"In that case, why don't I pick you up?"

It was simple if you thought about it. If I went to meet her at *her* house, there would be no worry about someone trying to hit on her. She'd initially offered to come pick me up at my own, but I'd graciously declined the invitation. Accepting would've crushed the little pride I had as a guy. So, instead of meeting up somewhere this time, I agreed in part, and we decided I'd stop by her house.

I'd also decided to accompany her back to her house, marking yesterday as the day I'd spent the most time with Nanami-san thus far. Boy, had that been a good day.

Just to be absolutely clear, I hadn't taken her home just to creep on where she lived, okay?

"Come to think of it, I guess this is how people who live together go home with each other, right? Doesn't that sound nice?" she'd asked on our way there.

Of course, I'd become immediately flustered, but I hadn't been the only one.

"Sorry, forget what I said," she'd murmured, having stepped on a land mine for herself as well. Her ears were completely red.

Just thinking about walking back home to the same house with her made me want to squirm with joy. And, with that on the mind alongside our prospective record of time spent together, I couldn't get myself to calm down. I was feeling beyond restless.

That morning, I'd thought about contacting her myself but had decided to be patient and wait. After all, I'd feel kinda bad about potentially interrupting her

fun with her friends. To my surprise, though, I'd actually ended up getting constant updates from Nanami-san. This had only served to fuel my restlessness.

Nanami: The movie was tons of fun! The love scenes were a little embarrassing, but I think I learned a lot from them. Look forward to it, okay?

Nanami-san, what in the world did you learn? And what exactly am I supposed to look forward to? There I'd been, in a mix of panic and excitement...

Nanami: We're having hamburgers for lunch! What did you have, Yoshin? I wish I could make you a bento on our days off too. Should I do that for you next time?

At lunchtime, I had thought about the bento that Nanami-san had made for me, and the cup noodles that I typically enjoyed had all of a sudden lost their flavor.

Nanami: Tomorrow can't come soon enough! I can't wait to see you. I'll call you tonight, okay? Let's make tomorrow a fun date.

Like that, she had kept sending me photos of the food she was eating or where she was, each accompanied by some cute message. Of course I hadn't been able to concentrate on my game.

One thing did strike me as odd though. *Don't girls take selfies in moments like these? She's not in any of these photos. I wonder why. Well, I guess it's no big deal.*

I'd been grinning so darn much today that I even creeped myself out.

Baron: Well, well, if it isn't the joys of youth. It's your first date, so of course you'd be excited. Are you all ready for it?

Canyon: Yeah, I'm ready. I'm gonna go pick her up at her house.

Baron: I see, I see. Right. Well, don't worry about the game tomorrow, and just go have a good time.

Peach: Please be careful.

Wow, Peach-san actually said something to encourage me. I'm moved...

Just as I was thinking that, she continued.

Peach: Try not to get all heartbroken when she says the movie is super boring. Same goes if she says the date was boring or that it was the worst date ever or the like.

No... She was recognizing my relationship, but her encouragement was still somehow negative. This girl was slowly treading deeper into the darkness. Did she really dislike gyaru that much?

Baron: Don't be like that, Peach-chan. You're right, though. Make sure you escort her properly, Canyon-san, so she doesn't say anything like that. If you do, I'm sure she'll like you even more, though I'm sure she couldn't possibly like you any more than she does now.

Peach-san was right in one regard—whether this date turned out to be a success or failure was entirely down to me. I was going to have fun just being able to spend more time with Nanami-san, but that didn't mean that she'd feel the same. This was important advice. I had to be careful.

Baron: So? What are you planning on wearing?

Canyon: Wearing? You mean on the date?

Clothes... Clothes for a date... Wait a minute. What kinds of clothes do you wear on a date? Can't you just wear regular clothes?

Canyon: Most of the clothes I have at home are black. Come to think of it, my trousers are sort of loose fitting... I guess I have jeans. How's that?

Baron-san and company paused for a moment, and then...

Peach: It can't be... You're not saying...?

Baron: Canyon-kun... You said you became pretty close with that upperclassman of yours, right? Can you try taking a full-body pic of yourself and sending it to him?

Even Peach-san, who'd been saying such negative things until then, seemed surprised. Had I said something wrong?

I changed out of the tracksuit I usually wore at home and put on my regular clothes. Aside from my loungewear and school uniform, I didn't have that many pieces of regular clothing—after all, I only really went shopping to buy books and video games. Anyway, for now, I just had to put them on.

Now, how do I go about taking a full-body pic? Come to think of it, my dad has that full-length mirror... I'll go and use that.

My parents, who were at home, scratched their heads when I started taking photos of myself. Ignoring their confused looks, I got my picture and sent Shibetsu-senpai a message.

Yoshin: Senpai, can I talk to you for a minute? I have a question. Can I ask you to take a look at the clothes I'm gonna wear on my date with Nanami-san tomorrow?

After about ten minutes, Shibetsu-senpai replied.

Shibetsu: Pretty bold of you to ask something like this of a guy still licking his wounds. But yes, I'm on a break from practice, so feel free to send me a pic.

For sure, anyone that saw what I was doing would say it was pretty terrible, but Shibetsu-senpai was the only person I could rely on when it came to fashion.

I only talked to my in-game teammates online, and the few people I talked to at school could hardly qualify as fashionable. Besides, I didn't have their contact info anyway.

Yoshin: I'm sorry, senpai. You're the only person I can depend on for this. Here, take a look.

I sent him the photo I'd taken of myself, which was immediately marked as read. Senpai's response came just as quickly.

Shibetsu: Misumai-kun, I'm not the biggest fashion expert since I'm always so preoccupied with basketball, so please take my opinion with a pinch of salt.

Was there something weird about my photo?

Shibetsu: Why are you head-to-toe black?! Your shirt and your jacket are black, and then your pants are black too! Are you a ninja or an assassin or something? And what's with the red letters on your shirt? They stand out so much against the black, they're almost frightening!

Yoshin: Give me a little credit, senpai. I haven't sent you a photo of my underwear. Right now, I'm wearing my green boxers.

Shibetsu: You do not have to tell me that! When I say "pants," I'm talking about slacks! Why are you goofing off at a time like this?!

Was that right? I'd always called them trousers, so I hadn't really thought. So he called them pants, huh? Then what did he call underwear? Well, not that it mattered.

Shibetsu: Misumai-kun, don't tell me *all* your clothes are like that?

Yoshin: I guess they are. Pretty much all my clothes are black.

Shibetsu: Go buy new clothes immediately! Any big clothing store will do the trick! And make sure you send me evidence of every outfit you try on!

Welp, looked like my outfit was a complete no-go. Not only that, Shibetsu-senpai was willing to check every single one of my potential outfits. I was very grateful.

Jeez, so it really was no good. I mean, I guess I had half expected criticism, but I hadn't expected it to be *that* bad.

Yoshin: Understood. Thanks, senpai.

Shibetsu: Right. I'm at practice right now so I may not be able to check my messages frequently, but

I suggest you speak with someone who works there. Just keep it simple, all right?

I thanked him again, but from then on, my messages were left unread. He'd probably gone back to practice. With that over with, I told Baron-san and Peach-san that I was logging off for a while.

Baron: Okay, well, I'm glad you got the advice you needed.

Peach: I didn't think it was going to be quite that bad.

All of a sudden, I felt embarrassed about going clothes shopping in the clothes I usually wear. I was stuck in a hopeless "chicken or egg" situation—that is, an "I don't have any clothes to wear to go to buy clothes" situation. Still, I had to suck it up and go shopping.

After withdrawing some cash from the ATM, I picked a clothing store in a shopping mall in the city, although it was a ways away from my house. The movie theater that I'd be visiting with Nanami-san tomorrow was located here as well, so I could do a bit of recon while I was at it.

Thus began my first shopping excursion to buy clothes for our date.

Given that this was a mass retailer, the clothes weren't as expensive as I'd thought, but upon attempting to assemble a whole outfit, the bill ended up pretty eye-watering.

The amount certainly wasn't kind on the wallet of a high schooler with no part-time job. I was beginning to regret not having taken up one, given how things were turning out. I wasn't particularly sure what kind of job I'd be good at, but at the end of the day, money was important.

I wonder if Nanami-san works part-time. Maybe we could work together... No, that wouldn't do. I'd be so distracted being around her that I'd keep making mistakes.

Picking out the clothes took quite some time because I had to try them on and send photos to Shibetsu-senpai. Shibetsu-senpai himself stuck around dutifully, making precise remarks about every photo.

Shibetsu: You'll get confused if you have too many options, so let's narrow it down to black skinny jeans for the bottoms. We can choose your top from there. It's your first date, so we should aim for something fresh.

Following Shibetsu-senpai's advice, I picked out a pair of black skinny jeans, a shirt with thick white-and-navy stripes, a white button-down shirt to throw over the top, and a simple belt. When I told him that my shoes were black as well, he told me to go buy shoes at a different store—where I ended up with a new pair of pale-blue sneakers.

With my outfit finally picked out, I sent him a full-length photo of myself, and given that he replied saying I looked good and “safe,” I was probably in the clear. I thanked him, to which he asked me again about the chances of receiving a bento from Nanami-san, so of course I politely refused. Instead, I told him that I'd ask Nanami-san if she wouldn't mind making Shibetsu-senpai his own share of one dish. Hey, it couldn't hurt to ask. Even so, his delight was clear to see from the letters alone. Did he really want to eat her cooking that bad?

In the end, I spent more than double the amount of money I usually spent on clothes. I supposed I just had to resign myself and think of it as an opportunity for a good investment. Now all I had to do was to make sure my parents wouldn't find out. They'd sure as hell notice that something was up.

Man, all I did was buy clothes, but I feel exhausted. I should head home early so I can rest before tomorrow's date.

Just then, I heard a familiar voice.

“Hey, can you leave us alone? We all have boyfriends, and we're really not interested.”

“Oh, come on, it's just the three of you right now, right? Why don't you all hang out with us? It'll be fun. As long as your boyfriends don't find out, it'll be fine.”

When I glanced over at the voice, I caught sight of Nanami-san's friend, Otofuke-san. Come to think of it, Nanami-san had said the three of them were watching a movie, so it made sense that she was here too.

I looked back over at them, seized by the tense atmosphere, but found myself a little perplexed. There was Otofuke-san, Kamoenai-san, and a girl that I didn't recognize, being hit on by a group of three cocky, questionable-looking guys.

"It's not about being found out or not. We'd never mess around with other guys when we have boyfriends. If you're just trying to pick up girls, go somewhere else."

"Don't be a killjoy! With the way you're all dressed, you've gotta be playing the field."

Otofuke-san was wearing shorts and an off-the-shoulder top, while Kamoenai-san was baring both her shoulders all the way down to her cleavage, wearing a delicate pendant around her neck. Both styles were what you'd expect a gyaru to be wearing.

At school, they usually wore their skirts rolled up, so seeing their legs wasn't anything new, but seeing their shoulders exposed like this made my heart beat a little faster. Though, admittedly, seeing their legs still kind of made my heart beat fast anyway.

The other girl was wearing a more modest outfit that I can only describe as clean and ladylike. She was wearing a long, flowing skirt, minimizing the amount of skin exposed. In other words, her style was completely opposite from the other two girls'. She was also wearing glasses, which gave her the impression of being as quiet as she was dressed.

I hadn't seen this girl before. Had Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san already parted with Nanami-san for the day and met up with a different friend?



No, that didn't matter right now. There was a more pressing matter at hand.

The girls were being hit on.

And they weren't enjoying it.

And I was witness to that.

Now, whether I wanted to help them or not... Well, of course I wanted to. I didn't even need to think about it. If I abandoned Nanami-san's friends, I'd be too ashamed to show my face on our date tomorrow, so I had no choice but to help them.

I'm sure any storybook hero, brimming with a sense of justice, would have rushed right in without thinking, only for things to turn out just fine. But come on, there were three guys to deal with here, and I'd never been in a fight with anyone. As pathetic as it might sound, if things turned violent, I was obviously going to lose.

So, I had to prepare myself a safety net.

I looked around searching for said safety net, then headed over to the three girls. I was just in time too, as I got there the moment one of the guys tried to grab one of their hands. Boy, that was close.

"Oh, hey. What a coincidence. You three were here too? Are those your friends?" I called in as friendly a tone as I could muster. I didn't forget to smile, of course, and made sure not to say their names—protecting their identities was just as important.

The three girls turned to me, seemingly shocked by my sudden appearance. The three guys raised their eyebrows, glaring at me with irritated expressions.

"Huh? Who the hell are you?"

Wow, talk about a short temper. I wished he'd talked to me with the same brilliant smile he'd flashed at the girls, though that smile had clearly been seeping with ulterior motives.

The dude that had stepped up to threaten me was the one that had acted most aggressively toward the three girls—a handsome guy with long brown hair and a hat tilted off to the side.

Sadly for him, his good looks were lacking when compared to someone like Shibetsu-senpai. This guy was like a cheap knockoff. Saying so was probably rude toward my senpai, but I'd just keep the idea to myself.

"I'm—"

"Ooooh?! If you've got nothing to do with them, then back off, Mr. Emo Cockroach. You don't wanna get hurt, do you? Get lost."

Ugh, I wished he'd at least let me finish. Not only had he concluded that I had nothing to do with this, but he'd given me an unfortunate nickname.

The two guys in the back were smirking at me as they listened to Knockoff Senpai's insults. Knockoff Senpai versus Cockroach Man... This sounded like some kind of B movie. No doubt it wouldn't become a hit.

"Are you listening, dudette?! If you've got nothing to do with them, get out of here!"

"I do have something to do with them. I'm, um... Yeah, I'm..."

Scared of the tough guy yelling at me, I looked over at the three girls. At this rate, these guys would say that I was irrelevant even if I told them I was the girls' friend.

What should I say?

All three girls were shooting me worried looks. Particularly frightened was the quiet-looking girl whom I'd never seen before—she was looking at me as if she were about to cry.

Our eyes met, and I smiled at her, trying to reassure her.

Yeah, I'm sorry I'm making you worry... Huh? I feel like I've seen those eyes somewhere before. If I'm not mistaken, could those eyes be...? No way. I can't be sure. If I'm wrong...I'm sorry, Nanami-san.

I pointed to the girl I didn't recognize. "I'm her boyfriend. Of course I'd step in if she or her friends needed help."

I for sure didn't recognize the girl I was pointing to, but I had seen those eyes before—those eyes that were now looking at me with so much worry.

I'd taken the leap. I'd told the guys I was her boyfriend.

And, upon hearing me, the guys burst out laughing.

Did I say something funny? Man, apparently their wits are as short as their tempers...

"Oh, I get it. You're Plain Jane's boyfriend. That's fine—just take her and go. Mr. Emo Cockroach and Jane the Four-Eyes make for a perfect couple. As for the other two, we'll—"

"No, that's not gonna fly. The other two are uncomfortable too, you know? I couldn't possibly leave my girlfriend's friends in the dirt."

This time, I was the one to interrupt. Of course, that pissed him off to no end—he grabbed my shirt and screamed at me as if ready to knock my lights out.

"Don't get so full of yourself, you creeper! Get the hell outta here if you don't want me to mess you up! You wanna get your girl mixed up in this too?! Huh?!"

Just as he yanked my shirt, my safety net arrived. I know I'd asked for them before all this, but their timing couldn't have been more perfect.

"Is there a problem, sir? I'm afraid you're disturbing our other customers. Could you please come with us?"

It was a group of tough-looking security guards. They had surrounded the three guys, not to mention me, as if to prevent them from escaping. I was even more shocked to see that there were more guards than I'd requested.

"What? I...I mean...w-we're not doing anything..."

"Oh, officer. I'm glad you came. This man is committing assault. Could you please call the police?"

Still gripping the front of my shirt, Knockoff Senpai glared at me, raising his voice in anger.

"Huh?! What do you mean, 'assault'?! I haven't done anything to you!"

"Don't you know?" I asked, steeling myself as my body began to tremble. Merely keeping my voice from shaking took every scrap of strength I had. "Just grabbing someone's shirt like that can be grounds for assault. With this many

eyewitnesses, you won't be getting away with it. You're gonna be arrested."

I'd only read about this on the internet, but I was pretty sure it was true. Besides, actually calling the cops would be way more trouble than it was worth. But still...

As if frozen upon hearing the word "arrested," the guy couldn't let go of my shirt.

"The two of you would end up being guilty of the same offense as him, no?" I asked calmly, turning my head to the other two guys. To say they were equally guilty was an overstatement, but the two ceased their smiles as anxious expressions clouded their faces.

"We... We had nothing to do with this. He was the one that started talking about picking them up. Plus, he's the only one that grabbed you, so if anyone's getting arrested, it's just him."

"Y-Yeah, we were just going along with him. It's not like we did anything. We've got nothing to do with this. Hey man, let's get outta here."

I supposed the so-called friendship of these three guys was but a fragile thing. Knockoff Senpai's two companions made to escape the circle of security guards.

Knockoff Senpai himself looked at them with an expression of pure anger and despair.

"I see. It's true that this guy was the only one who grabbed me, so I guess the two of you aren't a part of this. You can go."

Relieved to be offered their freedom, the two scurried through the slight opening made by the security guards. They sure were quick to quit on their friend.

"Hey! Wait up, you guys! Guuuuuuys!"

Meanwhile, the abandoned Knockoff Senpai finally let go of my shirt and tried to chase after them, but, as expected, he was stopped by the ring of security guards. His bitter insults echoed throughout the mall as he was taken away by security.

It wasn't like I actually wanted him to be charged with assault, so I left the

rest up to the mall guards. I'd already rescued the girls, so I really didn't care about what happened next. For now, I thanked the guards and ran back toward the three girls.

"Are you guys okay? I'm sorry I couldn't help you more effectively."

"What are you saying?! You were totally awesome. Thanks, Misumai. I was about to get my hands dirty again," Otofuke-san said, holding a fist in front of her face.

"Yeah, for reals," Kamoenai-san added. "I seriously thought Hatsumi was gonna knock the living daylight out of him. I'm totally glad you showed up."

Huh? Are they saying they could've handled the situation themselves, even if I hadn't stepped in?

"You're strong, aren't you, Otofuke-san?" I asked weakly.

"You get hit on a lot when you dress like this, so my bro—*boyfriend* teaches me self-defense. I'm probably stronger than most guys."

"Bro...?"

"Oh, Hatsumi's boyfriend is actually her stepbrother. Do you know Soichiro Otofuke, the martial artist?"

"Who cares? You can marry your stepbrother, so there's no problem."

Unfortunately, I was unfamiliar with martial arts, so I hadn't heard the name before. But if she'd been trained by someone like that, then my rescue had all been for nothing.

Regardless, Otofuke-san seemed to be quite the character. Being in a romantic relationship with your stepbrother seemed like something out of a manga.

"Then I guess I really did jump the gun a little on that one, huh?"

"No, no, you really were a big help. My br...oyfriend was saying he'd have to start acting as my bodyguard if I beat anyone else up."

I guess I did the right thing then, maybe? Well, as long as I hadn't done anything uncalled for, I supposed it was all okay.

“Anyway, you’re pretty cool, huh? Maybe this is the power of love? Right, Nanami? Earth to Nanami! Why don’t you snap out of it already and join in the conversation?”

Kamoenai-san had turned and was calling out to the quiet girl in the back. It was then that I finally learned my prediction had been correct.

When I looked into her eyes again, I knew I recognized those sparkling eyes, glasses or none. Those beautiful eyes belonged to none other than...

“Nanami-san?”

“Y-Yeah. Um, thanks for helping us, Yoshin. I’m, uh, really happy that you knew it was me even though I’m in this outfit.”

The girl standing before me, dressed the exact opposite to how she did at school, was indeed Nanami-san.

It wasn’t that I’d been certain, but I had wondered if that might not have been the case.

“I like gyaru fashion, but I actually like clothes like this a lot too. When we hang out, just the three of us, I tend to dress this way. Are you, um, disappointed?”

“Not at all. It looks pretty cute on you. I mean, you’re talking to the Emo Cockroach. I guess my wardrobe really does suck.”

Otofuke-san and Kamoenai-san burst into giggles. After all, that weird nickname wasn’t all that wrong. More than feeling angry, I felt like he’d accurately pinpointed the nature of my wardrobe.

“I guess it’s a good thing that I came to buy clothes today. I was able to run into you, and I was able to lend a hand. Though I guess we could’ve done that without some guy hitting on you.”

“Even so, how did you know it was me?”

“Isn’t that the power of love?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s right, isn’t it, Misumai?”

When they put it that way, I felt a strong sense of guilt. I hadn’t even been

sure that the girl I was helping was Nanami-san. If I told her that, she was bound to be disappointed, but I felt that I should be honest with her.

“No, I’m sorry. I thought I recognized your eyes, but I wasn’t sure. I did think they looked like yours. Are you disappointed in me?”

Hearing my response, Nanami-san shook her head and smiled. She was wearing glasses and a different outfit than usual, but her smile was as bright as always. “No, I’m not disappointed. I’m glad you’re the sort of person who’d help others no matter who they are.”

“Really? Then I’m glad. It was worth making the effort even if I was terrified.”

I finally understood why she hadn’t sent me any pictures of herself. She’d probably hesitated to show me this side of her. It was adorable, really.

For a little while after that, Nanami-san and I looked at each other, forgetting the world around us. Even that somehow made me feel all warm inside.

It was her two friends that broke us out of our trance.

“Gawd, the air’s so hot I’m gonna melt. Why don’t you two just go on a date starting now? Oh, tomorrow is your proper date, right? How ’bout going for two days in a row?”

“Yeah, yeah! Go, go!”

With that, we snapped back to reality. Nanami-san blew up at her two friends for teasing us, while I just stood there with an ambiguous smile on my face.

If the two of them were going to let us, a date wouldn’t be a bad idea, but thinking back to the clothes I was wearing, I decided against it.

“I would love to hang out, but I just came here to buy clothes for our date tomorrow, so don’t let me spoil your fun.”

“You came all the way here to buy all new clothes?” Nanami-san asked.

“Well, um, my clothes are all kinda black, so I figured I’d take the chance to change my wardrobe up a bit. I’ll look much more put together tomorrow, so you better look forward to it.”

Nanami-san looked somewhat apologetic, which wasn’t how I wanted her to

feel. Because seeing Nanami-san now, I was genuinely glad I'd come to buy clothes after all. Thinking of myself wearing all black like this, I felt embarrassed just standing next to her.

For today, it was best to feel satisfied at being able to run into her accidentally. Spending quality time with her looking like this would be unacceptable and indeed unbearable.

"I see. Good job, Misumai. In that case, it's better to save the fun for tomorrow, huh?"

"Yeah, we'll take good care of your girlfriend for you, Misumai."

As if they understood the situation, the two girls walked away, taking a disappointed-looking Nanami-san with them. I said my goodbyes and told her I'd see her tomorrow, to which she nodded as she walked away.

When I turned around to leave, though, Nanami-san called out after me.

"Hey, Yoshin...which version of me do you want to see tomorrow?"

I turned back to meet Nanami-san's gaze. Her question was extremely difficult, but I answered it with a smile.

"Whichever version of yourself you feel comfortable with is a version I'm happy to see."

It was the same unhelpful response I'd given her when she'd asked me about bento requests, but she smiled happily at me regardless.



Today was Sunday—the day of our date.

"Morning, Nanami-san. I'm a little early, but I'm here to pick you up."

"Good morning, Yoshin. Thanks for yesterday."

I'd messaged Nanami-san from a spot a little way away from her house and met up with her once she came outside. It was a desperate attempt to avoid running into her family.

If I really did run into them, it probably wouldn't be a problem, but I was still kind of embarrassed, so I'd asked her to let me do things this way. This made

our meeting a little more exciting, like some kind of secret tryst.

Nanami-san's outfit today was somewhat more toned-down than usual. She was wearing a white blouse and a light-blue skirt that went down to her ankles. But in various places—how should I put it?—she had retained aspects of her usual gyaru look, like cutouts on the shoulders and various sparkling accessories.

I'm not the best person to be describing any kind of fashion, but it was as if she had fused a more muted outfit with some gyaru flashiness. What in the world was this style called? All I could register was that it was cute.

As for me, I was struggling to relax because I was wearing brand-new clothes, but at least I didn't feel like I looked super out of place standing next to her. I really appreciated Baron-san, Shibetsu-senpai, and everyone else helping me out. If they hadn't given me a heads-up, I probably would have been standing here dressed in all black. Just the thought made me shudder. Ignorance truly was a dangerous thing.

"Your outfit seems a little different today. It looks nice," I said.

"Yeah... I figured if I dressed this way, my dad wouldn't figure out I was going on a date. He probably thinks I'm hanging out with Hatsumi and Ayumi again."

Apparently, Nanami-san was keeping the fact that she and I were going out a secret from her family. I mean, so was I, I guess, but I didn't mean anything by it. It was just a hard thing to bring up. How many high schoolers actually reported to their parents that they were going out with someone? Only, I couldn't help but feel that my parents had noticed something.

Yesterday, after I'd got back from buying clothes—which was a rare enough occasion as it was—they'd seemed surprised by the clothes I'd chosen. They hadn't said anything about it, but my dad, seeming deeply emotional, had nodded with a thoughtful "I see, I see." Then this morning, though they had already left by the time I got up, I had found way more money on the table than they usually left when they were away.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. I was grateful, but I was also kind of anxious that they hadn't said anything about it. For now, though, I should probably put my parents to the back of my mind.

I was feeling a sense of invincibility and omnipotence today, maybe because of my new clothes. The least I could do was escort Nanami-san properly.

“Shall we go, then?”

“Yeah. Oh, wait. Yoshin...”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“That outfit... It suits you. You look nice.”

Shoot. She beat me to it.

That’s right—these were the kinds of skills I still lacked. Why couldn’t I have been the one to compliment her first? Besides, it was totally unfair of her to say something like that so early in the morning.

She flashed me a blinding smile, but I turned beet red, unable to look her in the face. The invincibility and omnipotence I’d felt earlier had instantly dissipated. Instead, I was taken by an overwhelming sense of happiness.

“You... You look nice too, Nanami-san...and, you, um... You look pretty today.”

I had made my best attempt at a counterattack, but Nanami-san just came right up to me, taking my hand in hers.

“I know,” she whispered.

I felt relieved at feeling her hand in mine. Before, just this much would have made me feel nervous, but perhaps this meant I’d matured a bit.

Oh, Nanami-san’s ears are red, so maybe she is happy to hear that. Did my counterattack work after all?

“So, what movie did you end up choosing?”

“Ah, I went with the one based on the American comic book. You said you hadn’t seen it yet. I already booked the tickets online and reserved our seats.”

“I didn’t even know you could do that. When I go with Hatsumi and Ayumi, we just buy tickets at the counter. Did you make sure to get us a couple seat?”

“I didn’t... But you know this movie theater doesn’t have those! Don’t tease me like that.” I smiled wryly at Nanami-san, who was flashing me her teeth between giggles. I mean, I had gotten seats that were next to each other, so

they were as close as can be to a couple seat.

Nanami-san may have dressed differently, but inside, she was still the same—the same Nanami-san who liked to tease me until it blew up in her face. Being able to go out on a date with her made me the happiest guy in the world.

“Speaking of, I’ve actually never seen any of the movies in this series before. Do you think I’ll enjoy it even if it’s my first time?” I asked.

“Yeah, I think so. I started watching somewhere in the middle too and ended up getting really into it. I’ve not seen the entire series either,” she said.

“That’s a relief. I looked it up beforehand and saw there were more than twenty movies already.”

“Well, if you do get into it, let’s rent them all and watch them together. I’m not gonna lie, though, I’ll probably make you watch them with me even if you *don’t* get into it.”

Watching all twenty-plus movies together sounded like a dream. To finish watching the entire series would take way longer than a month. Actually, I guess if we committed to it, we could do it, but that wasn’t what she was trying to say.

I couldn’t help but wonder how she really felt about this relationship. Was it for just practice, out of a sense of duty for the dare, or did she truly have feelings for me? Was the reason she looked really sad sometimes that she felt guilty?

I knew this relationship was only a dare, but she didn’t know I knew that. Even so, she was always smiling at me anyway. It was a carefree smile with absolutely no trace of malice, and every time I saw that smile, I felt as if I were deceiving her.

Now was about the time I could use a guy friend who would teach me about girls in real life. Or couldn’t there be a gauge that would conveniently display how she felt about me? I was so inexperienced when it came to these things, I had absolutely no idea what to think.

Baron: I think she’s already smitten with you. I know you’ve been dating for less than a week, but

does it really seem like she's the type of person who could deceive a guy like that?

My answer to Baron-san's question had been a solid "No." I didn't even need to think about it. In all honesty, I didn't think she was crafty enough to do such a thing, but her deceiving me and her actually liking me were two separate things entirely.

I knew I was taking my negativity a bit too far, but I just didn't have the courage to take the next step. Even though I'd come this far, I was still...

"Yoshin? Do you maybe prefer watching movies alone?"

Hearing her voice, I snapped out of my thoughts. *That's right, I'm on a date with my girlfriend.* For now, I had to set my negative thoughts aside and concentrate on making sure she had fun.

"No, not at all. I was just thinking about how it'd be just the two of us, so I was worrying that maybe I'd be too nervous to concentrate on the movie. Plus there are loads in the series. It'd take more than a month to finish them all, wouldn't it?"

A shadow fell over her face.

Oh shoot, I'd been thinking about the dare just now, so I'd accidentally mentioned the one-month time frame. I'd been doing my best not to bring it up till now, but I'd somehow totally messed up.

Surprisingly, though, she shook off her clouded expression. Closing her eyes just once, she turned to me with a smile that housed a sadness so slight, I almost missed it.

"Then until we finish watching the entire series, we should make sure to stay together."

Her suggestion left me thoroughly speechless. Was I to interpret that to mean that, even after a month passed, she would keep dating me? Was I allowed to be so full of myself?

With the atmosphere feeling rather awkward between us, I did my best to clear the air with a quip. I shouldn't be making her look so sad. Today was for her—I had to make sure she was having fun.

“Jeez, that’s so harsh. You’re gonna dump me as soon as we’re done with the series? We’re gonna have to stretch it out for as long as possible then. Like I said before, I have no intention of letting you go no matter what.”

I wondered if I’d sounded a bit too creepy, but Nanami-san laughed. *Good, she wasn’t creeped out.*

“It’ll be fine—this series will go on forever. The next one’s already been announced for next year!” she said, grinning.

“Oh, I see, so the longer the series gets, the more guaranteed our relationship will be.”

At last, we were able to laugh together. Nanami-san’s smile had returned to normal. I breathed a sigh of relief, then took her hand and headed toward the theater.

“Yoshin, there’s no way you’ve never dated a girl before. You seem so weirdly used to things, and you even bought new clothes for our date. I’m just wearing clothes I already had.”

“You know that’s not true. Today, if my gaming friends and Shibetsu-senpai hadn’t said anything to me, I would’ve shown up to our date wearing the same clothes I wore yesterday. They stopped me and told me there was no way that was gonna work.”

“For the record, what did they say to you exactly?”

“I dunno. Senpai was all, ‘Are you a ninja or an assassin?!’ Don’t you think that’s messed up?”

At that, Nanami-san burst out laughing.

“Ninja?! Ninja, huh? Ninja... Pfft... Ha ha ha!”

It seemed that had tickled her in just the right way. She turned away from me, quivering. I wasn’t sure what was so funny, but as long as she was laughing, that was a win.

“Then yesterday, you helped us out with your ninja skills, huh? In that case, thank you, Mr. Ninja,” she said through a fit of giggles.

“If I really were a ninja, I would’ve helped you with a bit more pizzazz.”

I wasn't sure how to feel about being thanked in a voice quaking with laughter.

As we continued walking and talking, we arrived at the theater in no time. We picked up our tickets, bought drinks and popcorn... Then we were all set.

"Hey, I really should pay for half," Nanami-san said concernedly.

"No way. Today is to thank you for making lunch for me. If you paid for half, how am I supposed to return the favor?"

Nanami-san agreed, albeit somewhat reluctantly. And just as a side note, I also intended to pay for lunch today.

At first, I'd wondered whether I should get her a gift as well, but Baron-san had stopped me.

Baron: Naw, it's a bit too early for that. It'd be a bit much. If you want to give her a gift, you'd better wait till your one-month anniversary or something.

One month. One month, huh? I would have to do my best to make that one-month marker a day to remember.

That was why I intended to treat her to lunch instead and to take her back to her house later after we'd taken a look around the mall. That was the plan, anyway. I had wondered if it would be better to do more, but it seemed that wasn't the case.

As we were chatting, the screening time arrived, and we turned our attention toward the front of the theater.

While we sat there, Nanami-san and I continued chatting about nothing in particular. We talked about how it was weird to be together on a Sunday, how we were looking forward to the movie, what Nanami-san thought about a previous movie in the series...

I was surprised that I was able to talk like this with someone—to talk so much, so normally in a place outside of school, and in a movie theater with a girl, to boot.

Gradually, the screen took on a slight glow, and the lighting in the theater

grew dim. Nanami-san turned her attention toward the screen as the movie began.

I, however, didn't look at the screen, but sat there looking at Nanami-san. In the moment the light completely disappeared, her profile looked stunningly beautiful. I knew right then and there that I'd remember her face much more prominently than I'd remember the movie.

With the movie playing, we ceased our chatter and lost ourselves in the story. It really was fun to watch. The action was spectacular; the story was rich; and the plot twist left us on the edge of our seats.

Partway through, as if it were a necessary element to any movie, a romance began to develop. Whenever there was a scene that included a kiss, or one that inched toward something a little steamier, I couldn't help but steal a glance at Nanami-san. But then, at one moment, Nanami-san looked at me too, and our eyes suddenly met.

Without a word, Nanami-san moved her lips as if to tell me something. She was probably trying to tell me how awkward this was, or something along those lines. The light from the screen lit up her smile, and our hands accidentally brushed one another's. It felt different from when we usually held hands, so I just let my hand rest on top.



By the time the movie reached its climax, our hands had parted, but the warmth of her hand still lingered.

Nanami-san seemed to be enjoying the movie, but I kept shifting my gaze between her and the screen. Would we have kept our hands touching like that if I'd chosen a romantic movie instead?

I spent more time thinking about Nanami-san than I did thinking about the movie, but I really did enjoy the movie itself. After it finished, Nanami-san seemed super excited by it. In an attempt to rein in that excitement, we decided to head to a café to dish out all our thoughts.

“Woow, that was totally what it means to be at the edge of your seat! The fight scenes were so intense! And that ending?! It was so moving but also kind of sad. A hero really does have to fight for the sake of the planet!”

“Yeah, it was tons of fun. But I have to admit, there were some scenes where I was like, ‘Huh?’ I guess that’s because I haven’t seen the one before it.”

“Oh, same here. I didn’t recognize some of the stuff that came up, so I couldn’t stop thinking about it, but I finally get why people were calling this the culmination of the entire series.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize there were things that you didn’t get either. You looked like you were enjoying it so much, I figured you knew the whole story.”

“Were you staring at me that whole time?”

Shoot, what was I blabbering about?! I foolishly confessed that, even after our eyes had met, I’d frequently glanced over to see the expression on her face. Seeing her narrow her eyes at me, I averted my gaze and tried to talk my way out of it.

“Well, you know, you were sitting right next to me, so I couldn’t help looking at you. It was... It was just a coincidence. You looked at me that one time too, didn’t you?”

Nanami-san continued glaring for a moment, but then sighed, smiling as if to tell me she’d forgiven me.

“Yeah, we looked at each other that one time. I was kind of surprised.”

Nanami-san said nothing beyond that, not mentioning how our hands touched, so I decided not to bring it up either. Maybe she thought nothing of it. Was she embarrassed, or had she just gone with the flow? Or...did she want to keep it a secret between us?

After that, we shared more thoughts about the movie, had lunch together, and then went to look at clothes because she said she wanted to pick some out for me. We had a really great time together. In fact, we had so much fun that by the time I realized, it was already time to go home.

I had thought that today I'd only be with her until early evening. Her parents would probably worry if it got too late, and I didn't have the courage to invite her to dinner. Having dinner alone with a girl felt like way too high of a hurdle for me.

As I was contemplating taking her back to her house, I began mumbling to myself.

"Now, what should I do about dinner..."

"Tonight? Aren't you eating at home?" Nanami-san asked, having overheard me.

"Oh, both my parents are out of town for work. They probably won't be back until tomorrow night."

"Then what are you gonna do for dinner tonight?"

"I'll probably go eat out somewhere, or just fetch takeout or order something in."

Nanami-san seemed to think for a moment before opening her mouth to respond.

"That's no good. You need to eat a balanced meal."

"Hmm... Yeah, but I don't cook. Just one meal like that should be fine, right?"

"Right... I see!"

I thought her exclamation meant that she agreed with me, but turns out, I was wrong. Her expression indicated that she'd made up her mind about something, and her eyes gleamed with a strong determination.

“What is it?”

“I’ll come to your house and make dinner for you tonight!”

Um, excuse me? When did I agree to this?



Is the scene unfolding before my eyes really happening?

I pinched my cheek as hard as I could. The pain told me that what I was seeing was real. Yup, that hurt, but I still couldn’t quite believe it.

“Wow, your house is really well equipped. Though I guess that makes sense, since you don’t live alone. Is your mom the one who usually cooks?”

“Yeah, my mom or my dad. Whoever comes home first ends up cooking.”

“Your dad cooks too? That’s cool. My dad can’t cook at all. The only thing he can make is fried rice.”

“I don’t cook at all either, so your dad’s pretty impressive by my standards. I can’t even cook a hamburger steak, and I’m not sure I could make fried rice.”

“Then how about I teach you how to cook next time? Guys who can cook are very in demand.”

“I don’t think I need anyone demanding me other than you, though.”

Nanami-san fell silent. Had I said something weird?

Nanami-san was a sight to behold, cooking in an apron we’d found in my kitchen. All she was doing was preparing dinner, but the scene was way more impactful than anything I’d seen in the movie that day. The most incredible image was streaming in real time before my very eyes.

Was I really allowed to watch this for free? We can’t even watch movies for free, so surely I had to pay *something*. Though I guess in a way, I had already paid...

No, calm down. I have to calm down. How did this even happen? Let’s think back a tiny bit...

“I’ll come to your house to make dinner for you tonight!”

Before I could say anything, Nanami-san had taken my hand and was leading me toward the mall grocery store.

I had no way of stopping her when she was this excited. When we arrived, I stood beside Nanami-san, staring at the unfamiliar store.

“So, what were you thinking of having today?” she asked, much more at ease than I was.

“Gosh, I really hadn’t thought of anything. There’s a chain gyoza place a short walk from here, so I thought maybe I’d eat there since it’s pretty cheap.”

“Gyoza, huh? I would have liked to let the filling rest overnight, but we can still make some, for sure! Will you help me wrap them?”

“Oh, yeah. If there’s anything else I can do...”

Overwhelmed by the turn of events, I agreed to help cook even though I’d never done it before. I figured that, at the very least, I should be able to help wrap gyoza.

“Then let’s go pick up some... Oh, hang on.”

Nanami-san stopped in her tracks and pulled out her phone to send a quick message.

I just stood there staring as she typed, but she eventually blushed, put her phone away, and said, “All righty, then.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I just told my mom I’d be having dinner with Hatsumi and Ayumi. And I texted the two of them too, just to be safe.”

Nanami-san stuck her tongue out at me, like a child up to no good. I’d made her lie to her parents... I felt really bad about that.

“Anyway, let’s get shopping. Do you know the ingredients for gyoza?” she asked.

“Um, yeah. I think...at least, I know...I think...probably,” I mumbled stubbornly to the curious Nanami-san, who was tilting her head and smiling at me teasingly while still managing to look cute. But I have to admit, I had no idea. Ground

meat, chives...oh, and garlic, maybe.

Nanami-san was adding items to the basket with zero hesitation. I didn't know you put Chinese cabbage in gyoza. What were the seaweed, cabbage, and tomatoes for? Were those for the gyoza too?

"Oh, these? Gyoza wouldn't be enough by themselves, so I thought I'd make a salad and some seaweed soup. You'll help me, right?"

"I'll do my best."

And like that, we purchased all the necessary ingredients.

I paid for everything, of course. Nanami-san again insisted that she pay for half, but considering she was making dinner for us both and my parents had given me extra cash, I convinced her it wasn't right for her to pay.

There's no way my parents knew this was gonna happen, right? Because if they had, they were psychic.

On the way back to my house, Nanami-san said something that echoed in my mind.

"Shopping for ingredients and walking home together... It's like we're newlyweds, huh?"

Her words had such destructive force that I was pretty sure she was trying to kill me. I couldn't think of anything smooth to say to her in return. I truly had no words.

The whole way to my house, she was in excellent spirits, while I couldn't calm down at all. But even then, I was pretty much having the time of my life.

And that is how we arrived at our present moment...

In said present moment, I was busy stuffing the gyoza wrappers with the filling. Nanami-san had shown me a few examples, and from there, she'd left it up to me. It probably couldn't be helped that I was doing such a poor job of it.

Meanwhile, Nanami-san was busy making the soup and salad. I'd never really watched my mother cook, so I couldn't be sure, but I could only assume Nanami-san was as skilled as it gets.

Almost like a newlywed wife, in fact.

Agh, stop. My mind kept wandering in that direction because of what Nanami-san had said on our way home. *Right now, Yoshin, you're just a dumpling-wrapping machine. Don't think about anything. Just wrap.*

Soon after, Nanami-san seemed to finish preparing the side dishes, because she came to sit down in front of me and started helping me wrap the gyoza. Her pace was twice—no, three times as fast as my own. Plus, the gyoza she made were shaped perfectly. The difference between mine and hers was like night and day. *That's weird; I'm supposed to be the dumpling-wrapping machine.*

"So pretty..."

"Huh? What are you saying all of a sudden?!" Nanami-san exclaimed, surprised by my mumbling.

Ah, it seemed I'd been rather unclear and made her blush. The gyoza wrapper she was handling tore and became a victim of our blundered interaction. Never mind—it would probably taste the same once we cooked it.

"Oh, I, uh... I mean the gyoza you make are so much prettier than mine. You really are good at cooking, Nanami-san."

"O-Oh, that's what you meant. Yours aren't too bad either, you know, especially for your first try. My dad always overstuffs his gyoza, or he uses too much force and tears the wrappers."

As we continued chatting and wrapping the gyoza, the mountain before us continued to grow. This...looked like we'd overdone it.

"We made too much, huh?"

"Yeah, I think we did."

Faced with the towering mountain of gyoza, we looked at each other and laughed. This was way too much for two people. It could feed five—no, probably more people than that.

"Gosh, I didn't realize it was so hard to shop for two. Plus, I got all excited thinking that I was cooking for you."

Nanami-san brought her hands to her face and blushed. I genuinely wanted to

eat all the gyoza she'd made for me, but I knew this was far too much.

"Maybe you can take the leftovers home. We'll have school tomorrow, so it'd be nice to get to have them for lunch too."

Plus, I wasn't sure how I'd explain the presence of this many gyoza to my parents when they got back home—or explain why I, who absolutely never cooked, would make gyoza. I sure as hell didn't want to explain my secret relationship with Nanami-san.

"I guess I can just tell my family that we had a gyoza party at Hatsumi's house or something."

Nanami-san was keeping our relationship a secret from her family too, but given that she had friends she could rely on, she seemed in a much better position than I was. While there were some classmates at school that I exchanged pleasantries with, calling them friends would be a stretch. And since I started dating Nanami-san, I'd stopped talking with those classmates too. The only real-life person I could really talk to now was Shibetsu-senpai.

Speaking of which, I'd promised Shibetsu-senpai that I'd ask Nanami-san for a share of her cooking as a thank you. But considering I'd ended up making these gyoza too, maybe I should wait to hold up my end of the bargain.

After that, Nanami-san began cooking the gyoza we'd wrapped together.

During that time, I made myself busy by wiping down the table and getting the plates ready. In other words, I helped out with tasks that I didn't normally do when I was with my parents.

Wow, it really did feel like we were a married couple.

While I set the table, Nanami-san served up beautifully cooked gyoza with golden edges. They had picture-perfect grill marks and gave off a mouth-watering smell. Along with those, she'd made soup with seaweed and glass noodles, a veggie salad, and...a heap of grated daikon?

"When we have gyoza at our house, we usually put a lot of grated daikon in the dipping sauce. It tastes nice and fresh."

"Wow, I've never tried that before."

We served up some rice and sat across from each other. Oh man... We were becoming more and more like newlyweds by the minute. I felt so embarrassed.

“Th-Thanks for the meal.”

“Not at all. Bon appétit.”

I never imagined we’d have such an exchange outside of school lunch hours. Perhaps Nanami-san was thinking the same thing, as her cheeks were slightly red.

As usual, the food Nanami-san had served up was delicious. We dug right into our food, talking and laughing with each other as we ate.

This was my first time feeling so happy during a meal when my parents weren’t there. I was so moved, I almost felt like crying, but I somehow managed to keep it together.

When I got up to get a second serving of rice, though, Nanami-san got up and served me instead. That one hit me too hard.

It wasn’t the same feeling of wanting to cry. It just made me want to squeeze her into a tight hug from behind. Of course, I restrained myself. It was just that she looked so squeezable standing there like that.

We soon finished our meal, and since I’d never even really helped with dishes before, Nanami-san showed me how to do them, and we both cleared the table together. I never knew cleaning up could be so fun.

That fun ended far too quickly, though. It was getting late, and it was time for Nanami-san to go home. I was pretty bummed about it, but it couldn’t be helped.

“I’ll walk you home, Nanami-san.”

“Huh? Oh, no, I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I worry about you, especially with what happened at the mall yesterday. Besides, I can’t possibly let a girl go home by herself at night.”

I mean, I hadn’t been expecting to walk her home from my place, but I’d be worried sick letting her walk alone so late. Walking her home myself made way more sense.

“In that case...thanks.”

She seemed to be remembering yesterday too, as she accepted my offer with an anxious look on her face.

And so, we packed up the leftover gyoza, making sure we weren't forgetting anything. With the gyoza gone and the pots washed up, there was no trace left of her in my house. This way, even when my parents came home tomorrow, they wouldn't suspect a thing. Not that it was a problem if they found out, but I guess I would just feel really embarrassed about the whole thing.

“Thanks again for offering to take me home.”

I took the hand that Nanami-san offered me and proceeded to walk her home.

Of course, I was the one who carried the gyoza we'd packed up. Aside from all the things I'd been learning, I was at least able to do that much.

Along the way, we talked about all the fun we'd had that day, where we'd go next, and what I'd learn to cook from Nanami-san. Not a single step of the way did we run out of things to talk about.

Before we realized, we were already at Nanami-san's house. It really was a shame, but since she'd arrived safe and well, we could consider our goal accomplished.

The spot by her house where we'd met up in the morning was completely dark, but it was just a stone's throw away from her door. She should be safe from here.

“I'll see you tomorrow, Nanami-san.”

“Yeah... Thanks for today, Yoshin. I had a great time.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Just as we were smiling at each other and I was about to tell her that I, too, had had a great time, a burly man suddenly appeared behind Nanami-san. He was about as tall as Shibetsu-senpai, or perhaps even taller. Given that you could see his muscles through his clothes, he was certainly a whole lot more muscular.

At the burly man's appearance, I stepped in front of Nanami-san to hide her behind me. His face appeared angry at first glance and was pretty scary.

I didn't stand a chance against a man like this, but just as I resolved to buy enough time for Nanami-san to escape into her house, the man opened his mouth to speak.

"Nanami, who is this boy?"

"D-Dad... Why?"

Dad.

Dad...?

Dad?!

I turned around to look at Nanami-san and then looked back at the figure she'd called her father. I'm sorry, but they didn't look anything alike. And this guy was smiling at me with full intention to intimidate.

It seemed my day wasn't quite over yet.

Interlude: Her First Date

I'd waited long and hard for our date on Sunday—my first ever date, in fact. Luckily, this was also Yoshin's first date, so I wouldn't be the only first-timer.

Yesterday's movie had been a bit on the sexy side, so I'd texted Yoshin as I remembered various scenes while squealing over them with Hatsumi and Ayumi. I'd only been kidding when I'd told him I'd learned a lot from watching it—after all, I'd never even kissed anyone before. I'd practically jumped out of my skin when he'd replied saying he was looking forward to it.

Some bad stuff had happened on Saturday too, but I'd been able to see Yoshin because of it, so maybe it hadn't been all *that* bad. Plus, I'd gotten to see an unexpected side of him.

Even Hatsumi had said she hadn't expected him to have enough courage to come help us, given how quiet he usually was. The praise was surprising coming from her, since she rarely said anything nice about guys our age.

Ayumi had been just as quick on the draw, telling us how cool it was that Yoshin knew it was me in such an un-gyaru-like getup. I was really happy about that too.

Though, to be honest, I'd been kind of out of it at the time, so the two of them had had to catch me up on things later on.

Still, I'd had high hopes for today's date, already imagining that it would be fun. I mean, it had *definitely* been fun, but I couldn't believe I'd said something like that.

I'd invited myself to his house to cook dinner for him—where on earth had that come from?! But I couldn't back out by then. I'd already said it! My mouth had moved before my brain could think about it.

Sure, I worried about his eating habits, but this had also been a chance to have him eat something of mine other than bento lunches. I'd been desperate not to let the opportunity go.

Anyway, I didn't want him sitting alone eating by himself after our date. It had been such a nice day; I wanted it to end happily too. If I could contribute to that, I'd be satisfied. Besides, I wanted to spend a little more time with him.

Only once I'd invited myself over had I realized his parents weren't going to be there. I'd felt so nervous about being alone with him that I'd had a tough time playing it cool.

He... He wouldn't do anything weird, right? Oh, but if it's just a peck on the cheek, then... No, wait, but... A conflict of emotions had been whirling inside of me.

In the end, nothing weird had happened. It had been so much fun from start to finish and had even made me daydream about what it must be like to be newlyweds. Yoshin had helped with making dinner, which had made it even more fun. He'd looked extra adorable eating the food I'd made.

Eating dinner with Yoshin had been different from eating with family and eating lunch together on the school rooftop. We'd cooked together, eaten together, and talked lots and lots about our date.

I'd been a little surprised when Yoshin got up to help himself to a second serving of rice. At home, my mom was always the one serving everyone, and my dad seemed to appreciate it as a general practice.

I'd also felt kind of sad, though, since maybe Yoshin serving himself was because he tended to eat by himself more often than he ate with his parents, so I'd stopped him and offered to serve him myself.

Yoshin had stopped on his way up and looked at me all surprised. Maybe my offer didn't mean much and was just for my own self-satisfaction, but I still wanted to do that for him.

"How much do you want?"

"Oh, um, maybe make it on the more generous side."

Even that short exchange had filled me with joy, but just as I was thinking about us being like newlyweds and whatnot, I was shocked to realize that our exchange had been the exact same one that my mom always had with my dad.

We haven't even kissed yet. How have we already reached this point in our relationship? I couldn't help but wonder if Yoshin had noticed me grinning.

Time had passed quickly, and just as Yoshin and I arrived at my house, I received the biggest shock of the day.

"Nanami, who is this boy?"

As Yoshin and I were about to part, I heard a familiar voice behind me. Alarmed, Yoshin jumped to attention. Even if it had been subconscious on his part, it warmed my heart to watch him so readily move to protect me.

But...but why? Why was dad here? Oh no. Yoshin was looking even more surprised. Yup, that's right. This guy was my dad.

Chapter 5: The Past and the Future

What were the odds of meeting your partner's family after the very first date? I bet they're lower than scoring the character you've been eyeing in a gacha game. Or at least, that was what I was thinking as I looked up at the man in front of me.

Nanami-san had called this man "dad." He was tall, muscular, and—not to be rude—looked not one bit like Nanami-san, not to mention that he was a head or two taller than I was. He must have been shorter than Shibetsu-senpai, but he certainly *looked* taller than him. At first glance, he gave the impression of a professional wrestler.

"I'll ask you once more, Nanami. Who is this boy?"

Despite his frightfully intimidating smile, his voice was surprisingly gentle. Very captivating too, I might add. Maybe only his looks were scary.

"He, um... He's my boyfriend," Nanami-san whispered in resignation.

Her father, though momentarily surprised, seemed much calmer than expected.

I'd thought he might fly off the handle right then and there, but he instead seemed to think for a moment and, after wiping his smile away, replied to Nanami-san softly. He was way less scary when he wasn't smiling.

"I see, your boyfriend. Look, it's getting late. Rather than standing around on the street, why don't we take this inside?"

By that, I assumed he was calling for a family discussion. There didn't seem to be anything more I could say.

"I apologize for keeping your daughter out so late. It was all my fault. Please don't be angry with her."

There wasn't much I could do, but I at least gave it some thought and apologized to him so that as little wrath would fall upon Nanami-san as

possible.

I heard Nanami-san protest behind me, saying she was the one who'd caused the delay, but I shook my head to stop her. She was back at this hour because of my own thoughtlessness, as well as my selfish desire to stay with her for as long as possible. From her parents' perspective, it made perfect sense to feel uneasy about her coming back so late with some guy they didn't even know. Her parents probably also knew about her nervous constitution.

Nanami-san tugged on my clothes from behind me. I smiled at her, silently telling her not to worry, but I wasn't sure if she picked up on my message.

With that, I'd exhausted my options. Thinking I'd head home, I bowed to her father, when he said something that completely bowled me over.

"It's late. I'll drive you home. So, Mr. Boyfriend, I'd like to hear from you as well. What do you say?"

Was I...being invited into their home? By her father? Was I being invited over by her father before I'd been invited by Nanami-san herself?

Wait, why?! Wasn't this supposed to be a family discussion?

I wasn't mentally prepared enough for this, but at that moment, I heard Nanami-san whisper my name softly. Her tone was soft, feeble, and full of worry.

I had to make up my mind.

"Of course. And thanks for the offer. Oh, and please excuse my manners. My name is Yoshin Misumai. It's my privilege to be dating your daughter."

I couldn't listen to Nanami-san's timid voice and leave her all alone. I was her boyfriend, after all, and as her boyfriend, I had a responsibility to protect her. Only, I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be protecting her from her own family members.

"I'm Genichiro Barato, Nanami's father. Good to meet you, Yoshin-kun."

Genichiro-san extended his left hand toward me for a handshake. Didn't a handshake with the left hand indicate hostility? If so, it seemed that he hadn't yet acknowledged me as his daughter's boyfriend.

I supposed that couldn't be helped, given that I'd kept his teenage daughter out so late. I gripped his hand and shook it.

"Well then, shall we head inside? We'll catch our deaths out here."

We followed Genichiro-san as prompted. In those few steps to their house, Nanami-san was trembling so much, I took her hand in mine. I had my reservations about holding her hand in front of her father, but as long as Nanami-san was behind me, he probably wouldn't be able to see.

Nanami-san looked at me, surprised, so I smiled at her and spoke to her in a hushed voice to ease her worries.

"It's okay; I'm right here with you."

At those words, she stopped trembling and smiled, seemingly relieved. Yup, there was the smile I loved—not that I had the guts to say that to her directly.

Turns out, though, I was being completely naive, because Nanami-san's father saw right through me.

"To see our Nanami holding hands with a boy..."

Genichiro-san was shaking his head from side to side while pressing down on the bridge of his nose. Did he have eyes in the back of his head? His words sounded deeply emotional, but I didn't sense a hint of anger.

I'd been absolutely positive that he would be upset with me for holding his daughter's hand, but maybe I'd been wrong the whole time.

The three of us arrived at the front door and proceeded to enter their house. Just as we made it into the entryway, we were greeted by a woman and a girl.

"Oh my goodness, welcome. Gosh, I can't believe Nanami brought home a boy."

"Is this your boyfriend, onee-chan? Hmm, he seems kind of dull...but hey, not bad, huh? He doesn't seem violent or anything. Like, he suits you."

The woman was narrowing her eyes and smiling softly. This beautiful spitting image of Nanami-san was probably her mother. I couldn't help but wonder if Nanami-san would grow to look even more like her one day.

Next to her was a girl, seemingly of middle school age, who was standing with her hands at her hips. Perhaps this was Nanami-san's younger sister. She also held a strong resemblance to Nanami-san, but her eyes were a little more upturned in a catlike fashion. The girl was smiling and looking at her own sister as if she were seeing something amusing.

"Why are you both...?" Nanami-san asked hesitantly, looking from one female relative to the other, but the two women sighed and stared back at Nanami-san as though she were the incomprehensible one.

That one small gesture made them seem just like Nanami-san.

"Onee-chan, are you serious? When you go hang out with Hatsumi-san and Ayumi-san, you never wear makeup. You were being so fussy when you were getting ready today, you made yourself totally obvious."

"Right? How could I turn a blind eye to that extra bento box and how giddy you seemed making it up in secret? I'd have been a fool *not* to notice that something was going on."

Her younger sister was shaking her head while her mother tilted her head with a hand on her cheek.

Nanami-san, I know you were trying to keep this on the down-low, but it seems you were being rather obvious.

Nanami-san hid behind me, her face completely red, but seeing as I couldn't hold her hand in front of her whole family, I could only stand there in a fluster. The two women were also standing there, watching us with amused expressions.

"Give them a break, you two," said Genichiro-san, swiftly coming to our rescue. "We haven't even made it into the house. Let's take this to the living room, shall we? It'd be great if you could put the kettle on, dear."

Bewildered by the unexpected gesture, I followed him to the living room.

"Good luck, onee-chan," Nanami-san's sister said, waving at us before returning to her room. I guess now that she'd accomplished her mission of catching a glimpse of her sister's boyfriend, she'd lost all interest in hanging around. Or maybe she just wanted to avoid getting mixed up in any trouble.

Either way, I was grateful for her choice.

We sat down in the living room facing each other—Nanami-san and I on one side, Genichiro-san and his wife on the other. Genichiro-san may have been sitting in front of me, but he was looking directly at Nanami-san.

“Nanami, I’m a little upset. Can you guess why that might be?”

His face was stern, but his tone, gentle. The two signals were hard to decipher, but it seemed he really was angry.

Nanami-san spoke up tentatively. “Because I, um, didn’t tell you I had a boyfriend?”

“No, that’s not it. Well, I suppose as a father I have many thoughts about that, but I’m actually really happy for you—especially considering your circumstances.”

Even though her response had been incorrect, he smiled just a little to congratulate her. I felt my spirits lift slightly at the positive reaction.

But if that wasn’t it, what was he so upset about? Nanami-san seemed to be wondering the same; she was tilting her head.

“Then...what is it?”

“It’s that you lied to us, Nanami.”

Lied.

At that simple word, I could feel Nanami-san begin to tremble. I could feel myself getting as affected as she was—after all, that word really stung.

Of course, the lie Genichiro-san was thinking of was different from the one in our minds. Nanami-san and I were equally flustered. The lie we were thinking of may not have been what Genichiro-san had in mind, but I sighed, agreeing with what he’d said.

No one knew the real reason why Nanami-san and I were disturbed. Perhaps the only one who did know was me.

Genichiro-san continued, finally speaking his mind.

“No matter who you are, everyone is embarrassed by something different, so

I wouldn't say that leaving things unsaid is always a bad thing. But Nanami, you told us a lie. You were at your boyfriend's house, weren't you?"

"Y-Yes."

My gaze met hers as she cast me a sideways glance.

While she'd been at my house, Nanami-san had been texting with Otofuke-san. She had probably been asking her friend to be her alibi. That wasn't an uncommon occurrence in manga, but if we'd been found out, then the alibi would be no use. As a result, we had simply made her parents worry. It was my own fault for taking advantage of Nanami-san's willingness to deceive her parents.

"If this was just about a date, we would have let it go. But if you were at a boy's house, especially your boyfriend's house so late at night, you should have told us honestly. Were his parents home?"

"No, they weren't. That's kind of why I wanted to make him dinner..."

At her response, Genichiro-san's face twitched. Her answer must have struck a nerve, but he managed to retain his composure.

On the inside, he probably wasn't feeling calm at all, but he never raised his voice and only spoke as if he were merely admonishing us. I couldn't help but admire his maturity.

"So you went to your boyfriend's house when his parents weren't there. I see. That must have been difficult for you to share with us. But I wished you'd told us honestly, Nanami. Did you think we wouldn't let you?"

Nanami-san nodded in response to her father's question. I, too, had thought they wouldn't let her, which was why I hadn't stopped her from lying. That made me just as guilty. In fact, you could say that I was the one who'd made her lie.

As a couple founded on the base of a lie, us piling another lie on top of that was no laughing matter. Even though Nanami-san thought I didn't know about the dare, I couldn't help but feel guilt at her father's words.

Perhaps defending her would have been counterproductive, but just as I

moved to do so, Genichiro-san looked down at the floor and then looked up at me.

“In all truth, I can’t deny that there was the possibility of us saying no, but even then, as a parent, I wish you’d talked to us honestly. That may just be my ego as a father, but even so.”

Genichiro-san looked me in the eyes. I did my best not to flinch and instead returned his gaze. Though he still didn’t look at all like Nanami-san, this part of him—looking me straight in my eyes—was exactly what Nanami-san would do. At this moment, I realized that they were in fact very much alike.

“So you’re the boy that Nanami looks so happy to be making a bento for every morning. Seeing as you went out of your way to see her home safe at this hour, you must be as good a young man as I’d imagined.”

At the sudden compliment, I felt my face heat up. I thought it might be impolite to look away, so I simply waited for what he’d say next.

“Had you been telling me from the beginning what kind of a person he is, I probably wouldn’t have stopped you from going to make dinner for him, Nanami,” Genichiro-san said matter-of-factly. That smile of his really could be scary, but his opinion of me filled me with relief.

However, that sense of relief only lasted a moment, as he added, “Though, had Nanami wanted to stay over at your house, I’m not sure what I would have done to you!”

The moment Genichiro-san finished speaking, my whole body began to shake. His speech had been as kind and as calm as ever, but my body was acting against my own will.

“Honey, please calm down.”

“Oh, right. I apologize. Just the thought was distressing. How inappropriate of me.”

For just a moment, something that wasn’t quite anger flashed in Genichiro-san’s eyes and struck out at me like an invisible force. This was probably what was making my body quake so uncontrollably. Was this what you call murderous intent? An unfamiliar chill ran down my spine.

If that were the case, you truly could feel a chill from sheer murderous intent. And if I were to be attacked by this man—who was one tight outfit away from posing as a professional wrestler—I would no doubt be defeated without a chance of putting up a fight at all.

I did work out as a hobby, but that hobby was really nothing more than that. The muscles on this man clearly indicated a whole different level of commitment.

I have heard that large muscles aren't great for real-life fighting, but that probably wasn't a factor here. I would lose on sheer difference in strength.

Now, though, Genichiro-san was back to his gentle state, and my tremors had vanished as though they'd never existed.

"Our daughter, who's always been shy around boys, has finally got herself a boyfriend... It may have been difficult for both of you to bring it up to us, but I've honestly never been happier. I really do wish you'd told us, though I also understand how embarrassing it might be for you to share this with us."

For a parent, that sentiment made perfect sense. Just as I was on the verge of understanding Genichiro-san's thoughts, Nanami-san—who until then had been silent beside me—spoke up.

"But you were the one who said..."

This was the first time today that Nanami-san had raised her voice. No, not just today. Seeing her so distraught for the first time ever, I was completely taken aback.

She was always smiling, teasing me, and even putting her own foot in her mouth. This was my first time seeing Nanami-san, who was always so adorable, in a state like this. Her pained expression hurt my chest.

Maybe it was the first time Genichiro-san had seen her like this too; he seemed surprised at first but was trying his best in silence to listen without getting upset.

"You were... You were the one who said that weird thing. That's why I couldn't tell you I was going out with Yoshin..."

“Nanami, please calm down. I’m sorry, but I don’t remember saying anything in particular about you dating boys. Can you remind me what you’re referring to?” Genichiro-san asked in confusion. Even Nanami-san’s mother, who appeared calm on the outside, seemed unsure where to rest her gaze. Perhaps her parents truly had never seen her like this either.

Apparently, the reason Nanami-san hadn’t told her family that she and I were going out was because of circumstances at home. That sure was a surprise. I’d always assumed that the reason she hadn’t shared the news with them was because this was all just a dare. But now, Nanami-san was saying that the reason for her silence actually lay with Genichiro-san.

In a family with such kind parents, what could it possibly be?

But my confusion was soon put to rest by what Nanami-san came out with next.

“You were the one who said that you wouldn’t accept anyone as my boyfriend unless he was stronger than you!” she yelled, rising to her feet. “You said so the last time you got drunk! There’s no way Yoshin could beat you, so that’s why I didn’t say anything!”

With that, silence fell over the room. Not one person opened their mouth to speak.

E-Excuse me? I’m not allowed to date Nanami-san unless I can beat this guy?

At the same time as being impressed by such a manga-like turn of events, I was also overcome with hopelessness as I imagined having to battle against Genichiro-san. I’d thought this earlier too, but there was no way I’d be able to beat him.

Yeah, if that were the case, it was no wonder she’d been keeping our relationship a secret. There was no way she could have brought it up—even more so since she’d been dared into this situation.

I glanced back at Genichiro-san. Nope, no way I could beat him. I’d never even tried to punch someone, let alone fight someone. I didn’t stand a chance.

Besides, this relationship wasn’t even real. Was there any point in me going that far? I knew I’d been doing all this because Baron-san had suggested I get

Nanami-san to like me, but fighting her father wasn't part of the deal.

Ordinarily, I'd have given up here and ended our relationship. I had good reason to, all things considered. Yes, ordinarily.

But I couldn't help but think about everything that had happened until today. We'd held hands. We'd eaten lunch together. We'd seen different sides of one another than when we were at school. We'd seen a movie together. We'd talked in a café. We'd made dinner together. It had only been one week, and yet I had already made so many memories with her.

That was why, for Nanami-san, I felt like I should make more of an effort. If I were allowed to challenge her father multiple times, then I'd just have to fight him until I won. In the end, I'd have him accept me.

I'd made up my mind.

Ever since Nanami-san's outburst, silence had taken over the room. Maybe because she'd stood up and raised her voice, Nanami-san was breathing heavily, her shoulders rising and falling. Tears were starting to well up in the corners of her eyes.

When I saw that, I stood up on impulse, and the next thing I knew, I was holding her in my arms. Forgetting that we were in front of her parents, I found myself trying to comfort her. Even I was surprised by my actions.

"It's okay, Nanami-san. If that's what I have to do, I'll stand up to your father no matter how many times it takes. Didn't I say that I wouldn't let you go?"

"Yoshin, I... Yeah... Thank you..."



As I comforted the teary-eyed Nanami-san, I saw her mother looking over at me with interest.

“Oh my.”

Oh shoot, I totally forgot her parents were here. In my panic, I looked over at Genichiro-san, who was deep in thought, his arms crossed and his head tilted. He wasn’t even looking at us. *Huh? What’s with that puzzled expression?*

“Um, Nanami, I really hate to say this, but...”

I had a bad feeling about this. A *very* bad feeling. It was the feeling that he was about to overturn the premise upon which Nanami-san was operating. And usually, my gut is very trustworthy.

Nanami-san sat back down, tilting her head, seemingly confused by Genichiro-san’s reaction. Ironically, their heads were tilted in a similar fashion.

Finally, Genichiro-san—who looked rather apologetic—opened his mouth to respond. “Did I really say something like that? I don’t remember that at all...”

Taken aback, both Nanami-san and I—and in fact, even Nanami-san’s mother—stared back at him with blank expressions. Nanami-san looked particularly stunned. I’d never seen her so shocked. But even then, I couldn’t help but admire how cute she looked, which wasn’t anything new for me at this point. I mean, she’d just discovered she’d been agonizing over a statement that had been completely forgotten about. Of course she’d be stunned. I couldn’t even imagine what she must have been thinking.

“Dad!”

“Honey...?”

Just as Nanami-san finally got a hold of herself and was preparing to fire her fury at her father, her mother opened her mouth to speak. Her tone was terribly cold, her gaze fixed upon her husband. She still wore the same soft smile on her face as a moment ago, but now her eyes, viciously narrowed, were not laughing at all. They were so terrifying, I felt another chill run through me.

“Dear, how could you forget something so important? I’m pretty sure this is my first time hearing about it. If what Nanami says is true, then of course she’d

have difficulty telling us.”

“W-W-Wait just a minute, dear! Nanami, when did I say that? I truly, truly don’t remember anything!”

Her mother had probably changed the focus of our conversation on purpose. Panicking at his wife’s inquisition, Nanami-san’s father sought help from his daughter. Nanami-san responded with an icy stare.

“You said it when I was in middle school, while you were drinking with Oto-nii...”

Oto-nii? Who was that? As I wondered, Nanami-san leaned closer to whisper that it was Hatsumi-san’s boyfriend, her stepbrother.

When I stole a glance at Nanami-san, I saw that her tears had passed. In contrast, Genichiro-san was twisting his neck, trying to recall his faux pas.

Nanami-san’s mother continued smiling with her cold stare, while Nanami-san remained deadly serious with an equally chilling look in her eyes. And, in the midst of it all, Genichiro-san was cowering with his head in his hands.

What’s going on here? What am I supposed to do?

As I tried to figure out how I should react, Genichiro-san’s behavior underwent a change.

“Oh.” He looked up, his eyes open wide, and started sweating profusely. It seemed he’d remembered the comment he’d made that had so deeply affected Nanami-san. “Yes... I might have perhaps said something like that.”

“See?! You did say it!”

“It’s not what you think, Nanami! That was just spur-of-the-moment banter while talking with Soichiro-kun! I was just trying to encourage him!”

“Encourage Oto-nii?”

The story unfolded, with Genichiro-san at its center, though I was still feeling somewhat left behind. Nevertheless, I felt kind of relieved that I didn’t have to defeat him to win his approval. I’d seriously thought I’d have to take martial arts classes or something. Fortunately, that wasn’t going to be the case.

After that, Genichiro-san continued his explanation. At first, he had to pause several times, but the more he talked, the more his memory returned, and his words began to flow much more smoothly.

“At the time, he was feeling very annoyed and very worried with all the boys trying to get close to his little sister. So, as a playful suggestion that he demand those boys beat him before they could date little Hatsumi, I made a joke about only accepting a boyfriend of Nanami’s that could beat me.”

“I mean, I know Hatsumi was really popular during middle school, but were you guys really talking about something like that?” Nanami-san asked.

“That we were. Though I admit I hadn’t expected his sister to be so moved by his suggestion, that they would start dating like that.”

So you were the one who instigated all that.

I didn’t necessarily see anything wrong with them dating—Otofuke-san and her brother seemed like characters out of a manga—but a romance between stepsiblings seemed totally unreal.

Frowning at the oh-so-bizarre truth, Nanami-san pressed her fingers against her temples. When she released those fingers, she flashed her father an exasperated sidelong glance.

“So, even if I’m dating Yoshin, you’re not gonna make him fight you, right?”

“Absolutely. I’ll swear on my muscles and the wife I love. Besides, I’m not training to fight people.”

He tensed his biceps, directing his gaze at his wife. Nanami-san’s mother blushed profusely and broke into a smile. The difference between her earlier smile and the one gracing her cheeks now was night and day. Genichiro-san, too, was wearing an ear-splitting grin that held no trace of its earlier malice. Maybe he really had just been trying to intimidate me.

Nanami-san seemed relieved as well; she put a hand to her chest as she sighed in relief. At that moment, though, another question popped into my mind.

“Oh, um, sir, you...”

“Darn, I was hoping you’d call me ‘father’ so that I could tell you it was still a little early for that! Anyway, there’s no need to be so formal, Misumai-kun. Feel free to call me by my first name.”

“Uh, thank you. Then, Genichiro-san, you seem to do a lot of training, so I wanted to ask if you’re a martial artist of some sort.”

“Oh no, I’m just a regular businessman.”

I was wrong. I hadn’t thought it possible for a regular office worker to be so buff, so I’d assumed that he was a martial artist, like Otofuke-san’s brother.

“Then may I ask why you decided to train so much? I work out as a hobby too, but I can’t see myself getting to that level.”

“Oh, true,” Nanami-san said. “When I saw your abs, I thought I saw a slight six-pack. Dad’s are more like solid rock.”

The moment she finished speaking, I could’ve sworn I felt the temperature in the room drop. I didn’t need to guess why. It was again due to the murderous intent radiating from the general direction of Genichiro-san. And it was even more intense than before. This time, I was shaking much more than a leaf.

“Misumai-kun, you... You couldn’t possibly have exposed yourself in front of my daughter, could you? When and where might this have been? You aren’t possibly acting so indecently already, are you? No? I can trust you, can’t I?”

Fueled with shock, nerves, inaccurate information, and a wild imagination, Genichiro-san closed in on me with eyes full of panic.

“Th-That’s not it at all! It just so happened that my clothes had gotten wet, so I had to change in the nurse’s office, and she saw me!”

“That’s right! Yoshin saved me! Get your mind out of the gutter! We haven’t even kissed yet!”

Well, we had kissed indirectly... *Wait, Nanami-san? Why are you blushing with your fingers to your lips like that?!*

Her father may have allowed us to date, but it seemed unlikely that he would permit us to venture into physical territory anytime soon, so acting so coy was probably counterproductive. At least he seemed to trust what she’d said, as his

bloodthirst once again dissipated. Instead, he narrowed his eyes in concern.

“I believe you, Nanami. But I want you to know—if you make a habit of little white lies, your words will gradually lose their credibility. As a father, I want to trust you. There’s no need for you to tell us every detail, but from now on, I want you to tell us without hesitation when you’re going on a date with Yoshin-kun. If it’s him, we know you’ll be safe.”

“It’s true,” Nanami-san’s mother chimed in. “If Yoshin-kun’s the boy you’ve chosen, everything should be fine. Plus, he’s cute, and he’s thin while still apparently rather muscular. Nanami likes that her father’s buff too, so maybe she takes after me in that way.”

Neither confirming nor denying her mother’s suggestion, Nanami-san blushed and looked down at her feet. Yeah, it was great that her family got along so well. I grinned a little, and Nanami-san glared at me.

“Actually, there’s a reason Nanami’s so uncomfortable around boys, which is also the same reason I decided to start working out,” Genichiro-san murmured out of the blue. We’d gotten off topic, but I really wanted to know why he’d started training so much.

Interlocking the fingers in front of his face like a commander from some mecha anime, Genichiro-san began speaking softly. “Nanami, do you remember when you started getting uncomfortable around boys?”

“Um, I think it was before I moved up to middle school, so...maybe around sixth grade? I just started disliking being around boys all of a sudden.”

“Yes, that’s right, and that’s also around the time I started training like this.”

“Mom told me it might be down to puberty, so I hadn’t really thought about it, but what does all this have to do with you training?”

Nanami-san’s mother was fighting a troubled expression. I’d certainly heard that girls tended to think that boys their own age were immature, but was it really down something along those lines?

Nanami-san’s father, who seemed to remember something, stood up without a word and fetched us a photo album.

When I opened it, I saw a number of photos of a much younger Nanami-san.

Genichiro-san from back then really had had a regular body type. In fact, he looked to have been even skinnier than me. Wow, being able to change this much really did make the human body seem like a wonder.

“As you can tell from these photos, our Nanami was adorable even back in elementary school. Those pop idols on TV have nothing on her. Don’t you think so, Misumai-kun?”

“Yes, I totally agree.”

“Wait, what are you two saying?!”

I mean, there was no way I could disagree with him—and it truly was how I felt. There was no way I could fake it. Nanami-san really had always been super cute, even as a child.

But in contrast to Nanami-san, who was sitting next to me, blushing, Genichiro-san looked as if he was sucking something bitter.

“That’s right, and it was that cuteness that brought various hardships upon her. Back then, she was being bullied by the boys her age. As a result of that, a terrible thing nearly occurred.”

“What...?”

Nanami-san and I had spoken the exact same word in unison. Glancing at her to see how she was taking the story, I saw only confusion on her face. I took her hand, trying to reassure her.

“Yoshin...”

I wouldn’t ordinarily do this in front of her parents, but I felt like Nanami-san needed a firm hand to hold. Though I guess I had hugged her in front of her parents earlier, so maybe it was already too late.

It seemed, though, that my decision had been correct: both Genichiro-san and Nanami-san’s mother looked at me in approval.

“Thinking back on it now, it was probably just the phenomenon of young boys trying to draw the attention of girls they like. I can’t say I didn’t do such a thing myself when I was young.”

Teenage boys did tend to tease the girls they liked. I'd never done that myself, but I could at least understand the feeling of wanting to get someone's attention.

"Amidst all that, the inci—no, the accident occurred. Fortunately a teacher stepped in to help, so it didn't result in any major consequences, but it seems that from the trauma of the accident, Nanami lost all memory of it."

Genichiro-san didn't go into any detail. And from what I could tell, Nanami-san didn't seem to have noticed he'd quickly changed from "incident" to "accident." Perhaps he'd made the switch in an attempt to trigger her memory. Nanami-san was still none the wiser and was still sitting there tilting her head in confusion.

I, too, had no intention of prying into what had happened. There was no need to go around digging up the past when it had even the slightest chance of hurting her.

"It was probably for the better, since there's no need to force her to live with such a frightening and painful memory. But it seems that around that time, Nanami began feeling uncomfortable around the opposite sex."

So that's what happened...

Even though the shock had wiped her memory, her traumatic feelings toward men had remained inside her. That's why she felt uncomfortable around them, and she hadn't even realized it.

Perhaps the silver lining of all this was that what had happened hadn't stayed with her to the level that it would cause her to violently reject any guys in her presence.

"It was then that I started training so that I'd be able to protect Nanami from anything and everything. And to show her that not all men were scary, I decided to take up martial arts. That was also how I became friends with Soichiro-kun."

"Oh, that's right. I remember meeting Hatsumi for the first time at the dojo with you."

"Indeed. From there, you were blessed with good friends, and your discomfort seemed to lessen as the months went by. And today, you finally

brought home your first boyfriend.”

Nanami-san and Genichiro-san narrowed their eyes in unison—she from nostalgia, he from happiness. Both Genichiro-san and Nanami-san’s mother were on the verge of tears.

Before, Nanami-san had told me there wasn’t any particular reason she disliked guys, but hearing the story had made me realize the situation was more serious than I’d expected. As if to express her realization of the same, Nanami gripped my hand tighter.

I wasn’t surprised. She must have felt anxious, learning that such a thing had happened to her.

“It’s all right, Genichiro-san,” I said, shifting my hand to interlace my fingers with Nanami-san’s—you know, the same way that lovers do. My heart began beating a mile a minute at this new experience, but this was no time for me to be bogged down with nerves.

Nanami-san seemed surprised at my attempt to dispel her anxieties, but she smiled happily and squeezed my hand in return.

“I’ll protect Nanami-san from now on. No matter what happens, I won’t let go of her hand. And I won’t make her sad. I promise. So, I ask you once more to please let me go out with your daughter.”

I looked directly at Genichiro-san as I spoke. His eyes widened from his surprise while Nanami-san and her mother drew in deep breaths. Her mother, especially, was pressing her hands to her cheeks while squirming in her seat.

Had I said something strange? Genichiro-san must have been worried all this time, so I’d just tried to offer to protect her in situations when Genichiro-san wouldn’t be able to.

When I looked over at Nanami-san, I saw she was completely red. She was opening and closing her mouth, but not a word came out.

“Oh my. I was completely fine with the two of you dating, but when you say it like that, even I feel embarrassed. My, what a passionate proposal,” Nanami-san’s mother said.

“Well, well, I’m finally getting a son-in-law, am I? I thought I was prepared, but I feel both happy and lonesome. But if you’re prepared to take that next step, I’m happy to acknowledge your relationship, Misumai-kun,” Genichiro-san said.

Huh? This isn’t the reaction I was expecting. But wait... “Proposal”? What do they mean by that?

I replayed the scene in my head to more closely analyze what I’d said. In my bid to reassure Nanami-san, I’d carelessly blurted it all out, completely forgetting about the dare. I guess you could take it as a marriage proposal, depending how you looked at it.

I suddenly became worried that I’d aggravated the entire room, but then I took one look around me.

Nanami-san was sitting next to me, deeply moved, her eyes sparkling.

Genichiro-san was dabbing at his eyes in relief.

Nanami-san’s mother looked utterly elated, her face glowing with a caring smile.

Everyone seemed genuinely happy about what I’d said. But how had Nanami-san really taken it? I couldn’t read her mind, but she seemed just as happy as her parents did, which made me a little bit confused.

Well, I guess it was fine. I just had to do my best to protect her from now on. In that sense, nothing had changed. My guiding principle was still getting Nanami-san to like me.

Just as I had renewed my resolve, Genichiro-san reached out his hand. I took it, and we exchanged a firm handshake. This handshake was with the left hand.

“Ah, I apologize if I’ve misled you,” Genichiro-san said. “I’m left-handed, so I instinctively offer my left hand for handshakes. I don’t mean any harm by it.”

Oh, I see. I’d been worried that he hadn’t accepted me yet, but I guess it really had been a misunderstanding. Thus, the relationship between Nanami-san and me had received the stamp of approval from her parents.

Wait. Today is our first date, though. Is this supposed to be happening? I’ve

never dated anyone before now, so I have no idea. Is this normal for high schoolers going out?

“Nanami-san, from here on out...” I began to say, but just then, I stopped. Something seemed off about her. Her face was still glowing red, and put simply, she seemed to no longer be functioning properly.

“Nanami-san, are you okay? You seem kind of, um, dazed.”

“Yeah...”

“Nanami, you’re using these gyoza for your bento tomorrow, right?” Nanami-san’s mother chimed in. “I’ll go put them in the refrigerator. My, my, cooking together already. You two make such a lovely couple.”

“Yeah...”

“Nanami, do you like Misu— Ah, perhaps I should call him Yoshin-kun as well. Do you like Yoshin-kun? Do you love him?” Genichiro-san asked.

“Yeah...”

No matter what she was asked, all she could answer was “yeah.” Her mother and father were taking advantage of the situation and playing around with her. *Please stop... I think I’m gonna die from embarrassment.*

For a good while after that, Nanami-san had that same strange grin plastered to her face. I had no clue what she was thinking, but she remained somewhere far, far away from us. I mean, she was still cute, of course, but what exactly was she imagining?

“Hmm...” Genichiro-san mumbled to himself. “It seems our Nanami was so flustered that she slipped into a world by herself. It’ll probably take a while for her to return, so I’ll give you a lift home in the meantime.”

“Oh, uh, thank you, Genichiro-san. I really appreciate it.”

“Stop by whenever you’d like, okay?” Nanami-san’s mother said kindly. “Next time you two can relax a bit more and hang out in Nanami’s room. Oh, but mind that you keep it PG.”

“Of course. Thank you.”

Despite her concern, I could tell that Nanami-san's mother was welcoming me in her own way. Besides, I hadn't the guts to try anything like that anyway.

I really appreciated her warmth and had tried to thank her accordingly, but she seemed dissatisfied by my response.

"Dear me, aren't you going to call me by my name too?" she asked, pouting. "Oh, that's right! I haven't even introduced myself. I'm Tomoko Barato, Nanami's mother. You can just call me Tomoko-san."

"A-Aha ha... Thank you very much, Tomoko-san..."

Tomoko-san placed a finger on her cheek and tilted her head in an adorable manner reminiscent of Nanami-san. I had no doubt that Nanami-san took after her mother. Tomoko-san also seemed on the younger side, to the extent that she could stand next to Nanami-san and passably claim they were sisters.

I wondered what Nanami-san's real sister's name was. It'd be nice if we could get along too.

"Thank you again for having me. Nanami-san, I'm heading home now. I'll call you later tonight, okay?"

Nanami-san had finally come to her senses, though she didn't seem to remember what had been happening around her. Only...

"Huh? Going home? But we already live toge— Oh!"

Realizing what she'd just said, she covered her mouth with both hands.

So, apparently, in Nanami-san's fantasy world, she and I had already progressed to the stage of living together. Just how much had she imagined in so little time? Still, it was pretty refreshing to hear that even Nanami-san fantasized about stuff like that. I guess I should say it was an honor.

Meanwhile, Genichiro-san and Tomoko-san were looking at their daughter with what were best described as Cheshire cat—like grins.

"Oh, Nanami, don't you think it's still a little early for you two to start living together?" Tomoko-san asked gently.

"To think that our Nanami, who's disliked men for so long, has come this far... As a father, I have mixed feelings, but let's celebrate!" Genichiro-san cried.

Nanami-san turned several shades redder at her parents' remarks, but even then, she hopped over to me and squeezed my hands.

"I'll see you tomorrow!" she exclaimed loudly, as though to blow away her parents' grins.

I was still slightly worried about her, considering we'd brought up a painful memory of hers, but she seemed all right for the time being. Even so, I resolved to check in on her later.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow, Nanami-san. Thank you for everything, Genichiro-san. And sorry to have disturbed you, Tomoko-san."

"Huh? Wait, why are you calling my mom that? What did I miss?"

Oh right, she hadn't heard our earlier exchange. How should I explain?

It seemed I needn't worry, though, as Tomoko-san grabbed Nanami-san by the underarms and began dragging her away.

"This way, Nanami, dear! You *have* to tell me about everything that's happened so far. An evening of girl talk! I'm so excited."

"Wait, mom, tell me what's going on! No! Mom, that tickles! I'm gonna fall!"

So Nanami-san's ticklish, huh? I'll have to remember that.

As I continued watching, Nanami-san was dragged away. I had no chance of rescuing her from her fate, so I simply raised a hand to wave goodbye.

It seemed Nanami-san must have given up too; she smiled wryly and waved back at me.

Genichiro-san smiled, his eyes glistening with a far-off look. "My wife has been dying for a girls' night with our daughter, so she's probably just a little excited, is all."

With that, I took a seat in his car ready to head home.

Inside, I was trembling with fear, having no idea what I should talk about with my girlfriend's father, but Genichiro-san chatted warmly to me the whole time. He told me adorable stories from Nanami-san's childhood, about the time she started trying out gyaru fashion in high school, about how he had tried to learn

scary expressions in order to protect her, and about how he'd never quite been able to get his face to go back to normal. Like that, he told me many things.

In that moment, I felt that the reason Nanami-san was so good at listening and carrying on a conversation must be because of her father. There was no pause in our conversation, but at the same time, talking didn't feel like a burden. It was genuinely fun.

Her face from her mother, her character from her father... What a wonderful family Nanami-san had.

And after our very long chat, Genichiro-san told me something.

"Aside from family, you're the first person to know about what happened in Nanami's past. Not even her friends know about this."

Hearing that he'd shared something with me that not even her two best friends knew about, I felt a weight crushing on my shoulders.

"Then why did you tell me?"

Genichiro-san paused for a moment, then continued in a soft voice. "Well, it seemed to me that you act with Nanami's best interest at heart. When I first appeared, you tried to protect her from me. You held her when she was feeling anxious. You were by her side every step of the way, and when I saw that, I knew you were someone I could trust."

"That really is an honor, Genichiro-san, but I only just met you for the first time today. Is it okay for you to trust me so easily?"

"I think I'm a pretty good judge of character. Besides, you saying that is precisely why I can trust you."

Him saying that brought on even more pressure. His high expectations weighed on me. After all, I wasn't that great of a person. It was true that I always tried to put Nanami-san first, but that was because I was lying to her.

No, it was no use thinking about that now. I felt as though, little by little, I was losing my chance to escape, but...I also didn't dislike the feeling.

After all, we continued talking and ended up exchanging contact info. I admit I was a little surprised. Was it normal to add your girlfriend's dad? He did tell me

that I could get in touch if ever I needed him...

For now, though, I decided to take it as having gained a strong ally and leave it at that.

When I finally got home, I booted up my computer and logged into my game. Today's event was already in its final stages. I decided to check out what was going on while reporting the day's events to Baron-san.

Canyon: ...and so, her parents now officially approve of our relationship.

Baron: Just get married already, man.

The moment I finished giving him my report, Baron-san was quick to throw me a curveball. Such a dismissive reaction was rare coming from him.

Our other party members were just as eager to have their say, firing off messages like "Get married," "Go explode," and "Congrats!" Telling them we were still too young to get married was probably not the response they were looking for.

Canyon: Baron-san, aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself?

Baron: It's been like a week since you guys started dating, right? And what do you mean by *I'm* getting ahead of myself?! *You're* the one moving so quickly! I mean, isn't marriage the only thing left? Woooow, kids these days move fast...

The unusually tetchy Baron-san continued his lamentation.

Baron: Canyon-kun, you *must* have been lying about never having had a girlfriend. You've been a playboy this whole time, and all I've taught you was for naught, wasn't it?

I didn't know how to respond. Nanami-san *was* my first girlfriend, and I'd never been popular with girls, like, ever. More importantly, had he already forgotten my whole fiasco with the all-black date attire? There was a mountain of things I wanted Baron-san to teach me.

Canyon: Sure, I've held her hand, but I haven't even kissed her yet. I don't have that kind of courage.

Baron: Isn't the order of this all wrong? Why are you skipping the kissing and going straight to her parents to ask for her hand in marriage? If anyone's rushing things, it's you!

But I'd had no choice but to meet her parents, and I hadn't meant what I said to sound like that...though I had kinda glossed over that part, so Baron-san probably thought I'd proposed to her for real. I guess it couldn't be helped.

Of course, I didn't tell him anything about what had happened to Nanami-san in the past. That was her own private matter and not one to be spoken about lightly. At the end of the day, the fact should remain with Nanami-san's family members and those close to her. It wasn't something I should or could share with Baron-san.

Baron: But to say you still haven't kissed yet... I thought for sure you'd kiss her on your date today. After everything that's happened, you'd totally be in the clear if you wanted to.

Canyon: Do you really think so?

Baron: Yeah, had you not chosen gyoza for dinner, I think you could've totally gone for it.

Canyon: Gyoza? Oh, I see...

I hadn't even thought of that until he'd mentioned it, but the very tasty gyoza we'd had for dinner had been very, very full of garlic. The smell probably would have been a cause for concern. I'd had no need to consider these kinds of things in the past, but maybe Nanami-san had thought about it.

If I had requested something else for dinner, would I have been able to k-kiss her? For real?!

Wow, just thinking about it made me grin like an idiot. Embarrassment and joy were swirling inside of me, even if it was just a silly fantasy. But come on, I didn't have the guts to do that.

Baron: Canyon-kun, I'm sorry to interrupt your daydreaming, but don't you need to get in touch with your girlfriend? You said you were going to call her, didn't you?

Seriously, Baron-san, how do you read my mind like that? For now, though, I decided it best to log out and give Nanami-san a call.

But at that moment, another message popped up.

Peach: Canyon-san...

It was from Peach-san.

At first, I wondered if she was going to say something negative again, but her message turned out much different than usual.

Peach: If you're happy, then I have nothing to say. But...if you're ever hurt for any reason, I'll be here to comfort you. Please keep coming here like you always do.

Baron: Well, well, looks like Peach-chan has finally come around. But yeah, I don't think that will happen, but if it does, we'll be here for you.

I didn't know these people's names or faces, but I knew that despite us having met through a game, they were important to me. Their kindhearted words warmed my heart.

Our teammates added their own similar sentiments. I was really grateful to everyone, so much so that I found myself tearing up, but since I couldn't cry right before calling Nanami-san, I had to do my best to endure.

Canyon: Thanks, guys. I'll do my best to make sure that doesn't happen.

With my message sent, I turned my attention to calling Nanami-san. Come to think of it, it was my first time being the one to contact her so late. We'd been messaging each other every night up till now, but yeah, this was my first time calling her spontaneously.

Feeling nervous, I waited for her to pick up her phone.

The phone rang several times, but Nanami-san didn't pick up. Just as I was wondering if I'd called at a bad time, the call finally connected.

“Yoshin! Oh, thank goodness! Jeez, what took you so long? I’ve been having such a hard time!”

“Huh?”

For some reason, Nanami-san seemed out of breath. She also sounded a little bit angry.

“Seriously! It was so embarrassing! If I knew this was gonna happen, I would’ve just had you stay over!”

“N-Nanami-san?”

Stay over?! Under these circumstances, wouldn’t that mean sleeping in the same room? Shoot, now I’m having weird thoughts because of all my fantasizing earlier.

Does Nanami-san wear pajamas when she goes to sleep at night? No, wait. We have school tomorrow, so I couldn’t have stayed over either way. Right. No, wait—that’s not it either. Jeez, calm down, Yoshin.

“O-Oh right. Sorry, you can’t stay over. It’s just that Hatsumi and Ayumi sleep over all the time, so...”

It seemed Nanami-san had also realized the magnitude of her mistake. Her voice had grown shriller with every word. How cute.

Just then, I heard a voice in the background.

“Nanamiii... I won’t let you escaaape...”

Then came another.

“Come on, onee-chan, tell me! What do you like about my future brother-in-law?”

Both voices were female—more specifically, they were the voices of the two other women in Nanami-san’s household.

Oh, I see. They’ve been talking about girl stuff since I left...

“Ah, perfect! You can just put Yoshin-kun on speakerphone and have him tell us himself,” came the older of the two voices.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Yoshin!”

Flustered, Nanami-san hung up the phone.

Yeah... I certainly didn't have the courage to get involved in that one, but still, I felt kind of lonely.

However, immediately after, a message arrived from Nanami-san.

Nanami: Thanks for today. I had so much fun—I can't tell you how happy it made me. I'm looking forward to everything we have planned, so let's go out on a date again next week, okay?

Seeing her message, I couldn't suppress a grin. I responded to her immediately in an uncharacteristically proactive manner.

Yoshin: Sure, let's go out again next week. I'll see you tomorrow. Good night.

Starting tomorrow, I'd get to spend even more time with Nanami-san. And this time, it was family-approved. One by one, obstacles that had made us feel guilty were disappearing.

Still looking at my phone, I began to mumble words even more uncharacteristic of myself.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Nanami-san. I... I really like you."

With that, I turned slightly red as I wrapped myself up in bed.

I hoped that somehow my words would find their way to Nanami-san.



Later that night.

"Nngh... Nanami-san... Nanami-san, you shouldn't! We're still in high school... What do you mean, 'serve' me...? No, but why are you dressed like that...? Nanami-san?!"

I sat bolt upright in bed.

Just moments before, Nanami-san had appeared in my dream—a scandalous dream where she'd told me she loved me and pressed her body against mine. Maybe "scandalous" was an old-fashioned way of putting it, but at that

moment, I was too flabbergasted to care.

“Maybe I had too much fun today... But for her to say I love you... That was way too much of a fantasy, man...”

Recalling the uncannily realistic dream, I finally managed to crawl back into bed with phony memories of her loving me.

Interlude: Her Future

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Yoshin!”

Even though I’d finally had the chance to talk to Yoshin, I’d been forced to hang up before hearing his reply. Jeez! I’d wanted to talk more, but mom was being a nuisance!

But having Yoshin sit in on girl talk between my mom and my sister would have been way too embarrassing. I would have died. Even without him there, I was already red in the face.

I’d sent him a text message at the very least, thanking him for all the fun I’d had today and inviting him out on another date next week.

Today’s date had been at Yoshin’s invitation, so I was making sure to be the one to invite him for our next one. I wanted to come up with the plan this time—to do the same as he’d done for me.

In his reply, Yoshin had mentioned seeing me again tomorrow and ended the conversation with a “Good night.” That alone had made me break into a smile.

Had I had things my way, I’d actually wanted to say good night to him directly on the phone.

I turned my resentful gaze to the two women behind me.

How did this happen?

I couldn’t help but think that. Right now, right in front of me, were two very worthy opponents. One was my mother, Tomoko Barato. The other was my younger sister, Saya. They were both sitting there drinking their tea, paying no mind to the call they’d interrupted. Seriously.

Right after Yoshin left, my mom had dragged me away in high spirits.

“Now then, we’ve got the evening all to ourselves. It’s a mother’s dream come true! I’m going to have you tell me all sorts of things!”

Nothing and no one could stop my mom when she was in a mood like that. As

in, she wasn't going to stop. I had no choice but to give in.

"Okay, okay, I get it, so please don't tickle me so much. And please don't ask me any super embarrassing questions."

"Oh, don't tell me... Have you done things that were too embarrassing to tell your mother?" she asked with a grin.

No way! I thought, unable to hide my flushed cheeks. *I haven't done a single embarrassing thing!*

"Then there's no problem with me asking anything. I'm going to dig up all sorts of fun tidbits."

Don't read my mind! How do you know?! I haven't done anything embarrassing, have I?

As I battled my unease, my mom began snooping through my love life. First, she asked me what it had felt like when Yoshin hugged me earlier. Of course, I'd panicked at the time.

Y-Y-Yoshin?! We're in front of my parents! I'm happy, but isn't this a bit much?! What should I do?! My head had been so full of questions that I'd thought it might explode.

But even though his body was firm, the hug had still felt comforting, and I'd felt relieved. I'd even wondered if I should hug him back.

I'd been so happy that Yoshin had been willing to accept the conditions my dad had set that I really had been about to squeeze him back, but when I heard my dad speak, I'd frozen stiff.

Don't remember? What do you mean, you don't remember?! Give me back my moments of inner turmoil! Plus I'd been annoyed that I'd missed the chance of hugging Yoshin back.

As I recalled the thoughts that had crossed my mind, I noticed my mother grinning at me. It was a grin crafted half from amusement, half from happiness. I blushed again, realizing mom had cottoned on.

Just as we wrapped up that chapter, Saya decided to join us. I couldn't tell if her timing was awful or impeccable, but... No, it was certainly awful for me.

Saya had spent the whole time Yoshin was here holed up in her room, but just as he'd gone home and mom and I had started chatting, she'd decided to come crawling out. I would have much preferred that she'd stayed in her room, but sure enough, mom invited her to join us. Saya must have been just as curious, because she pulled up a chair, no questions asked. Oh, jeez.

This, ultimately, was how our girls' night proceeded: hosted by mom, starring me, and viewed by Saya. It was already late, so in order not to worry about our waistlines, we had tea without any sweets. It was as if they were telling me my saccharine stories were enough to serve as their dessert.

Our next topic of conversation was the moment Yoshin had changed the way he was holding my hand. When he did that, he'd told my parents he would protect me from now on no matter what—as if he'd been making a marriage proposal.

Mom and dad had gawked at him, stunned.

This... This is a proposal, right?

I'd been feeling anxious, having heard a story about myself that I didn't even remember. But hearing those words, during that moment, all my worries had flown out the window. I'd been overcome by sheer joy.

A proposal, huh? But tying the knot right after high school would be way too soon. I guess for now we'll just continue dating, then once we start college, we can start living together. Is that it?

Oh, but if that's the case, then what kind of a place will we choose? An apartment? Since it's just the two of us, it's fine if it's small, but then maybe at night we have to sleep cuddled up? Tee-hee...

I'd completely zoned out while my parents grinned at me.

Once we had gotten started, there was no stopping us. The whole time until Yoshin called me, the two of them had asked me all sorts of questions about what had happened since he and I started going out.

It really did feel like an interrogation. They had just kept asking and asking. Honestly, though, I'd kind of liked getting a chance to brag about Yoshin.

I told them all about the time he'd saved me, the time we'd gone to buy his bento box together, and even when he'd stood up to Shibetsu-senpai for me. By the time I realized it, I'd talked my mouth off about every little thing I liked about him.

The thing I didn't like—or at least, the thing that dissatisfied me—was that he was still calling me “Nanami-san.” That really was the only thing.

Perhaps doing so was hard for a boy like Yoshin, but I really wanted him to call me by just my name, no honorifics attached. Or a pet name, maybe. But that might make it seem like we were too lovey-dovey with each other.

I got off topic, but yeah. I'd talked on and on about all the things I liked about him. And that was the only thing I'd really talked about.

I didn't share the most important thing.

There was no way I could. After all, I'd confessed to him because of a dare.

I hadn't been able to admit to my family that that was the reason we'd started dating. For some reason, though, my mom hadn't asked me anything about how we'd met or how we'd ended up getting together. It was almost unnatural, really.

Anyway, I'd talked the whole time about what I liked about him, what I thought was cool about him, and how I wanted things to turn out. It was a little embarrassing, but I'd just kept opening my mouth and letting my compliments spill out.

Every time I had, Saya had squealed in delight. It was a rather surprising reaction from someone who'd said he seemed dull. She'd even started saying she wanted a boyfriend like that too, so I'd bluntly told her Yoshin was mine. In return, she'd given me a blank stare.

“Onee-chan, just how much do you like Yoshin-san? I just said I wanted a boyfriend as kind as him. I never said I wanted to go out with him.”

My little sister had been absolutely right. Even though I hadn't needed to, I had inadvertently—and voluntarily—shared unnecessary information about how I felt about him. If I'd only thought for a second, I could've figured out what she meant. *Agh! I'm too embarrassed! We're totally done talking about this!*

“I’m gonna go take a bath!”

Just as I shot up in my anger, my dad arrived back from dropping off Yoshin. Mom went to greet him at the door.

After seeing her off, I recommenced my plan to bathe and then head off to bed. I also decided to message Hatsumi and Ayumi later to let them know how the date had gone—that it had gone really well, in fact.

By that point, Saya seemed to have gotten her fill of teasing me, because she fluttered her hand to wave at me as I left.

I sighed and made my way toward the bathroom, relieved to be free from their clutches. They really were a carefree bunch, being as unconcerned as they were about my embarrassment.

But just as I finally got there, mom poked her head out into the hallway and said something strange.

“Nanami, I’m going to come visit you in your room later. Can we chat, just the two of us?”

“Oh, yeah. Sure.”

Chat with mom? Just the two of us?

Whenever dad, Saya, or I had anything on our minds, we would often talk with mom about it one-on-one. It was basically an unspoken rule to talk through any problems that way.

Even so, it was rare for my mom herself to initiate such a conversation.

I bathed quickly and changed into my pajamas. Then I got back to Hatsumi and Ayumi on how the date had gone, both thanking and apologizing to them as I let them know that the alibi we’d planned had been for naught.

As I was doing so, there came a knock on my door. It was mom.

“Nanami, can I come in?”

“Yeah, of course. Come in.”

By the looks of it, mom had taken a bath too.

My mother was really very pretty... No, in fact, she was *sensual*. Even as a

woman, I thought so. She was the kind of woman I wanted to be. I wanted to be just like her when I grew up, but then my partner would be... *No, let's not think about that now. If I do, I'll turn all red, and I won't be able to talk with mom.*

Now in her pajamas, mom sat down on my bed. She really did look kind of sexy having come straight from her bath.

I sat down next to her, just as I always did when I talked with her about something important.

"This is rare, huh?" I asked. "It's not every day you say that you want to talk in my room, just the two of us."

"Ah, yes. I suppose you're right about that."

My mom turned to me with a smile that suggested she was somewhat troubled. I hadn't seen her wear an expression like this for a very long time. When had it last been?

"Nanami, I'll come right out and ask. Which one of you asked out whom? Did you ask Yoshin-kun out? Or did he ask you out?"

I was surprised by mom's sudden question—the question that had been almost unnatural for her to avoid earlier. The question of who had confessed.

Despite having recently bathed, I felt my body temperature plunge. Chills ate at me from all over. Why was mom asking me this now?

"Well, um...I did, but..." I murmured hesitantly.

I couldn't lie to my mom. Even if I did, she always knew—because of some small gesture I'd made, the way I'd said something, or sometimes just that sheer feminine instinct she seemed to possess. I knew she was the one who'd raised us, but still, she was just too good.

"My, that's strange. All the things you said about Yoshin-kun seemed to be from after you two started dating. If that's the case, why did you decide to ask him out?"

My heart skipped a beat.

I couldn't tell her... I couldn't tell her it was because of a dare.

Couldn't I? Why couldn't I tell her, again? Am I scared my mom will be disappointed in me? No... Right now, the person I don't want to let down is...

As I sat there, unable to gather my thoughts, my chilled body became enveloped in something warm. It was soft and comfortable, and just the smell alone soothed me. And from that touch, my body gradually regained its warmth.

My mom was holding me close.

“Nanami, when your dad was talking about you lying to us earlier, you weren't thinking about the lie you told us today. You were thinking of a different lie, weren't you?”

“How... How did you know?”

“I'm your mother. Of course I know. And I know that you're hurting because of it. Can you tell me what you've got bottled up? You know that I'm always on your side, so won't you share it with me?”

At those words, tears welled up in my eyes. All the dark feelings I'd suppressed deep inside of me—about lying to Yoshin, deceiving him, and struggling to get him to like me while shoving my guilt away in a corner of my heart, this ugly heart of mine, as I'd smiled and shared with Hatsumi and Ayumi all the fun things I was doing every day, as I'd laughed and enjoyed all the time I was spending together with Yoshin... It all came bursting out.

“Mom, I... I'm doing something horrible to Yoshin. I... I asked him out because of a dare... I'm horrible...”

“Ah, so that's it. That's why all the things you liked about him were things from after you two started going out.”

“Yes... Yeah. I... I'm...”

The tears just wouldn't stop. I buried my face in my mom's chest, wetting her pajamas with my tears.

My mom continued to hold me. She listened to me—my sobs and words of regret—without saying a word.

I just kept crying, groveling in the ugliness of my heart and the feelings I had

for Yoshin.

“Nanami, you like Yoshin-kun now though, don’t you? You like him a lot?” mom asked once I’d calmed down a bit. She rubbed my back gently, as if trying to get me to open my eyes. Her words struck me right on the mark.

“Yes... Yes, I like him. I like him so much. I only want to be with Yoshin...”

This was the first time I’d admitted out loud I liked him, with no calculations or schemes. Up until this very moment, I’d never said it before. I’d been acting stubborn, saying I wouldn’t fall for someone so easily. But I’d finally been able to say the words I’d never managed to say before.

“What do you like about him?”

“Yoshin’s, um... He’s really kind... He looks out for me even when he’s hurt, and even when I wasn’t dressed the same as at school, he looked me right in the eyes and knew it was me... He even said I looked pretty back then...”

“I see. He really is a kind boy.”

“He always tells me what I want to hear; and he holds my hand when I’m feeling nervous; and he hugs me; and I feel safe just being with him; and it’s always so much fun...”

“Mm-hmm...”

“He’s not like the other boys. I don’t feel uncomfortable or gross or scared when I’m with him. I just wanna be with him...”

My mom held me closer.

I let everything out as I rested against her, but the tears still didn’t stop.

When my crying finally subsided and I really did feel like I had no more left in me to pour out, my mom moved her body away.

“Come now, let’s be done with this crying fest! Starting tomorrow, you’ll do your best to like Yoshin-kun even more!”

Having let me go, mom clapped her hands together and smiled her usual cheerful smile. I turned my tear-stained face toward her and looked up at her, stunned.

“You’re not mad at me, mom?”

“Well, I’ll have to scold all three of you together the next time Hatsumi-chan and Ayumi-chan come over. But I know they were thinking just about your well-being, so I won’t be *too* hard on them.”

Her words sent a chill down my spine. I knew she was only going to scold us, but when my mom got mad, it was no joke.

In my heart, I apologized to Hatsumi and Ayumi. *I’m sorry, but I promise I’ll be right there with the both of you.*

“You know, Nanami, it doesn’t matter how these things start. Even if it was for a dare, you already like Yoshin-kun, and I know Yoshin-kun likes you too. I’m already rooting for the two of you.”

“Mom...”

With that, I knew I had to stop kidding myself. I really, really did like Yoshin. I wanted to be with him forever. I didn’t care if I *was* easy. I wouldn’t lie about my feelings anymore.

“But you have to have some kind of closure.”

Mom brought her index finger to her lips and smiled bewitchingly. Her expression made me shiver. It was an expression I’d never seen on her before—the expression of a woman over that of a mother.

Closure?

She pointed at me and, as if giving me a command, said, “For your one-month anniversary, you have to tell Yoshin-kun the truth and apologize to him. After that, you have to let *him* decide what he wants to do.”

I froze, inside and out.

Until that point, my actions had been all for when he found out about the dare, but moving forward, things would be different. No matter how I acted, in the end, I would have to tell him the truth. That scared me. That scared me a lot, but...

“Okay, mom. I understand. For our one-month anniversary, I’ll tell Yoshin everything, and I’ll apologize. And after that, I’ll...I’ll tell him that I like him. It

won't be a lie this time. I'll tell him that I really, truly like him."

I spoke my words of determination as if to convince myself. Seeing my reaction, my mom smiled happily.

"In that case, until your one-month anniversary, you'll spend your days serving Yoshin-kun!"

"Serving?! Isn't that a weird way to put it?! It sounds kind of pervy!"

As if to make fun of me, my mom had returned to her usual self. I really couldn't keep up with her.

S-S-Serving Yoshin? What am I supposed to do?! My face felt hot just thinking about it. But even though mom had suggested I fess up on our one-month anniversary...

"Mom, don't you think I should apologize to him now?"

"You're scared, aren't you? I mean, I don't think there'll be any problems, but it takes a while to become emotionally prepared. Take your time getting yourself together, and use that time to warm up to him further."

Just like she'd said at the beginning, mom was on my side. That didn't mean she was going to be Yoshin's enemy. It was as if she were on both of our sides.

"And you know how they say that whoever falls in love first is the loser? What that really means is that if you both fall in love, then you're both winners and you're both losers—just like your dad and me."

Aaand mom was showing off again about how lovey-dovey she and dad were.

But listening to her, I couldn't help but feel that I, too, wanted to have a relationship with Yoshin like that between her and dad. That only got me blushing again—after all, it was too early to be thinking about marriage.

"Oh dear, were you imagining married life with Yoshin-kun? I know I said to serve him, but do keep it PG, dear."

Realizing she'd seen right through me again, I came to accept that I just couldn't beat my mom.

"Yoshin, starting tomorrow, I'm going to give it my all!" I exclaimed to the one

I loved, wiping away my tears.



Only my mother could truly hear me, but I somehow felt my words would find their way to Yoshin.

“Oh my, calling him the one you love already? You sure are head over heels, Nanami.”

“How in the world do you know what I’m thinking?!”

“I’m your mother; of course I know! Now then, I should probably go check up on the one I love too. Good night, dear!”

Blushing with a new kind of ferocity, I could only watch as my mother left the room.

Chapter 4.5: Us on Our Date

After we'd finished watching the movie and talking about it in a nearby café, we found ourselves strolling hand in hand through the mall.

Come to think of it, it was already lunchtime. I wondered what we should have. Nanami-san had told me yesterday that she'd had hamburgers. She'd even sent me a picture of her meal.

"What would you like for lunch, Nanami-san?"

It was a question that she usually asked me. Asking about lunch requests other than bento felt slightly different, but I still never thought I'd be the one asking the question.

"Lunch? Lunch, huh...?"

"You had hamburgers yesterday, right? You sent me a photo."

"Yeah. I hadn't had one in a while, but it was so good! What did *you* have for lunch yesterday?"

I averted my gaze. "Cup noodles," I answered sheepishly.

It wasn't like I'd done something wrong per se, but I still felt a mysterious mix of guilt and inferiority well up inside of me. To my surprise, though, Nanami-san responded as though it were no big deal.

"Is that why you didn't tell me what you had to eat yesterday? Do guys like cup noodles? My dad sometimes eats them in secret too and gets yelled at by my mom."

I suddenly felt a sense of camaraderie toward Nanami-san's father, despite not having met him yet. Yeah, my dad and I both liked cup noodles and ate them often, but each time, we'd get yelled at by my mom.

Discovering there were other similar families out there, I felt a mysterious sense of relief. Nanami-san's father, huh? I wondered what kind of person he was, though I was pretty sure it'd be a long time before I met him. When I

finally did, I'd have to make sure I didn't do or say anything rude.

But hang on—this wasn't the time to be thinking about the future. First, we had to figure out today's lunch.

"If you had hamburgers yesterday, how about we have spaghetti today? I heard there's a pretty good spaghetti place nearby," I said.

"Pasta, huh? But aren't pasta places kind of expensive? Why don't we go somewhere a little bit more affordable?"

"Well, you know, today is supposed to be a thank-you for all you do for me every day, so I wanted to splurge a little and give back a bit."

Feeling embarrassed that I'd said "spaghetti" instead of the obviously cooler "pasta," I was trying my best to persuade her when Nanami-san cupped my face in her hands.

"Um...Nanami-san?"

My cheeks burned at her sudden action, and all I managed to do was mumble her name.

"Look, Yoshin, I really appreciate your gratitude and all, but you really don't need to worry about thanking me that much."

Even though she wasn't holding my face tightly, I couldn't avert my gaze. Her eyebrows tilted downward as she smiled as though speaking to a child. Somehow, though, that smile looked a little sad. She was probably feeling all sorts of conflicting emotions.

"But you want us to date on an equal footing, right? If that's the case, if I don't thank you for making lunch for me every day, I'd feel like it wasn't fair."

"Then let's go for something cheaper. I think I know the place you're talking about, and it's gonna cost more than a thousand yen each. That's too expensive for a treat."

"Hmm, something cheaper... Then, what would you like to have?"

In the end, we'd ended up back at the same question. Nanami-san really was a thoughtful person. She seemed like the complete opposite of the manipulative type. If only I could get Peach-san to see this, she would probably

stop worrying about Nanami-san so much.

Nanami-san let go of my cheeks as she contemplated my question. I felt sad to lose her warm, soft hands on my face, but I studied her all the same as she thought.

Just as I was about to tell her that she didn't need to think so hard, she said something unexpected.

"I think I just cracked the code of why some men say that they'd be happy to eat anything."

"Wait a minute, I thought 'anything' was the most troublesome answer!"

Surprised, I'd responded to her comment with a quip and a lighthearted smile. More surprising, though, was my own cheeky response, which I never would have managed just a short while ago.

I glanced over to see if I'd annoyed her, but Nanami-san didn't seem displeased at all; instead, she looked up and said rather falteringly, "I mean, you know..."

What was she going to say? Maybe she had so many different things she wanted to try that she was taking care not to bother me with all of her requests. As it turned out, that wasn't the issue at all.

"If I'm eating with you, pretty much anything is gonna be delicious, right?" she said, clasping her hands together with noticeably flushed cheeks.

Having been caught unawares, I was completely dumbstruck. I had no idea that the word "anything" could take on such a beautiful meaning.

I'd been smacked in the face by the sweetest, most satisfying attack I could have asked for. Seriously, it felt like I'd been hit on the back of my head with full force. That was an illusion, of course, but how else could I describe it?

How can you be saying something like that on our very first date, Nanami-san?

"Yoshin, what's wrong?"

Without realizing it, I'd crumpled to the ground and hidden my face in my hands. My face felt so hot, I wasn't confident I'd be able to face her.

“Nanami-san, remember when you once asked me if I’d dated anyone before?”

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah?”

“Well, is this really the first date *you’ve* ever been on? Because you saying things like that make me think I’m gonna lose it, like I’m having a heart attack.”

Today, we seemed to have switched positions in terms of who asked the questions and who answered them, but she just tilted her head quizzically and stared at me.

“This is definitely my first date. Though, I guess if you’re counting girl dates, then it’s not my first? But with a boy, it’s totally my first.”

“Do you say totally destructive things when you’re around Hatsumi and Ayumi? Stuff like ‘anything is gonna be delicious’?”

“Well, yeah, if you’re with friends, then it’s... Oh...”

It seemed Nanami-san had finally realized the meaning of her own words, and she started blushing just like me. After being silent for a while, she gathered her courage and puffed out her chest defiantly.

“Well, yeah! It’s true! Food always tastes good if you’re eating with someone else!” she declared with a beet red face.

As for me, I used to think that food tasted the same whether I ate by myself or with other people, but...

“Yeah, you’re absolutely right.”

This time, I had to agree with her.

I’d learned in just this past week how delicious a meal could be when you ate with two people. Even though this was just a dare, Nanami-san had taught me what I’d been missing.

“Jeez, you’re totally smirking at me. You’re making fun of me, aren’t you?”

“Not at all! You’ve got me all wrong. If I’m eating with you, Nanami-san, then I’m sure anything would taste delicious.”

Nanami-san pouted childishly. I felt bad that I’d made her misunderstand, but

she even looked cute with a face like that. In just one day, I felt like I'd seen so many different sides to her.

"Oh, that! I wanna eat that!" she exclaimed out of the blue.

"That? What's 'that'?" I asked.

As if having come to a decision, Nanami-san raised her index finger in the air. Had she made up her mind? I had every intention of granting whatever wish came out of her mouth, but what she said next was, again, unexpected.

"Gyudon! I wanna go to a gyudon place! I've never been!"

"Gyudon?!"

Isn't that, like, the last place you're supposed to take a girl on a date? To eat beef and rice? I'm pretty sure I've seen someone say that on some TV show before!

From what I could remember, the story had been of some girl saying that her boyfriend took her to a gyudon place on their first date, and she'd been too shocked to believe it. But wait a minute—what if the girlfriend was the one saying she wanted to eat it?

"Gyudon, huh? We can have something a little nicer, but are you sure that's what you want?"

"I've never been with the girls, so I'd always wanted to try it. Wait, don't tell me you've never been either."

"Oh, no. They're good places to go alone, so I've tried a few different ones."

"Does that mean that I'm the first person to go with you?"

I had to think about that for a moment. Admittedly, this *was* my very first time going to a gyudon place with another person. In fact, this was probably my very first time eating out with someone, period.

"Yeah, I think you *are* the first. I mean, I've never been on a date before, so I guess everything about today is a first."

"Going to a place like this is a first for me. I'm so stoked that I get to share this first with you."

“I’m happy about that too, but are you *really* sure that’s what you want to eat?”

“Yees! I’ve already been to the pasta place with Hatsumi and that lot, so today, let’s experience something new together!”

With that, Nanami-san took my hand and started walking. I was slightly perplexed by her happy expression. I mean, was gyudon really something to get that excited about? Well, as long as she was happy, that was all that mattered.

“Okay, let’s have fun with this,” I said.

“Exactly. Oh, next time, I wanna try a ramen place! I’ve never been to one of those either, so you’ve gotta help find us a good one.”

What surprised me this time wasn’t her meal, but rather that she was already planning our second date. Instead of this being our first and last date, was Nanami-san willing to go on another date with me? I couldn’t tell just by scanning her cheerful expression, but if there really was going to be a next time, I couldn’t be happier about it. And during that next time, I wanted her to have an even better time.

So I said to her, “Then yes, I’ll check a few places out for sure. So will you go on another date with me?”

“Of course. You’re my boyfriend. I’d love to go on another date with you.”

Was I overthinking it to say that she almost sounded as if she were trying to convince herself? Was it okay for me to believe what she’d said?

As I thought it over, I decided to start heading toward the nearest gyudon place, the warmth of her hand in mine.

Right then and there, I made a decision in my heart: to try my best to have her enjoy our next date even more. And so, that was all that had happened at lunch on our first date.

Afterword

To those who decided to pick up this book—it's nice to meet you! I'm Yuishi. As mentioned in my author profile, I'm in my late thirties, and next January I'll finally be turning forty years old.

I wasn't expecting to be publishing my own book so far on in life. Challenging myself with something new has been very exciting.

I began posting this work on March 7, 2020, and concluded the main story line in May of the same year. After that, I began posting updates with side stories. It was in March of this year, in 2021, that I was contacted regarding the novelization of this work. By then, it had been a year since I first posted it.

At the time, my ranking on the site wasn't terribly high, so it really felt like a bolt from the blue. I still remember raising my fist in the air and shouting out loud in my room when I heard the news.

To have been able to release this work—which had already been completed—in novel form is all thanks to the readers who've been supporting it this whole time.

From that point on, my days became full of chaos and turmoil, but they also were tremendous amounts of fun.

I cannot thank Kobayashi-san of the HJ Bunko editorial department enough for first discovering this work. I don't think I'll ever be able to look them in the eye, given that they now know all about my various fetishes.

And to Kagachisaku-sensei, thank you so much for the beautiful illustrations for this volume. I must have given you so much trouble since I hadn't done any character design for the novel. I was grinning from ear to ear every time I received an illustration, and I spent days resisting the urge to share it with the whole world.

When I finally announced that the work was being novelized, those who supported me were as excited about it as I was. All the warm words I received

truly brought tears to my eyes. It had been a long time since I cried like that.

I'd like to take this moment to express both my gratitude and my condolences to all those who were involved in the making of this book in their various ways.

The book includes many revisions and additions compared to the web version. I hope that you were able to enjoy it. If so, I couldn't be happier.

Regardless of whether you know what happens next in these two lovebirds' relationship or whether you're following along for the first time, I hope that you enjoy watching over them.

I've actually written a few bonus stories, including some that you can read only on the Novel Up Plus website. If you enjoyed this work, I'd appreciate it if you come take a look!

There were also many side stories I couldn't include, so I'd like to release them somewhere sometime too. I'll do my best to sniff out if there are any good ways of doing so.

With gratitude, from Yuishi, who has written so much of the main text that they were barely able to manage writing this afterword. I look forward to seeing you in the next volume.

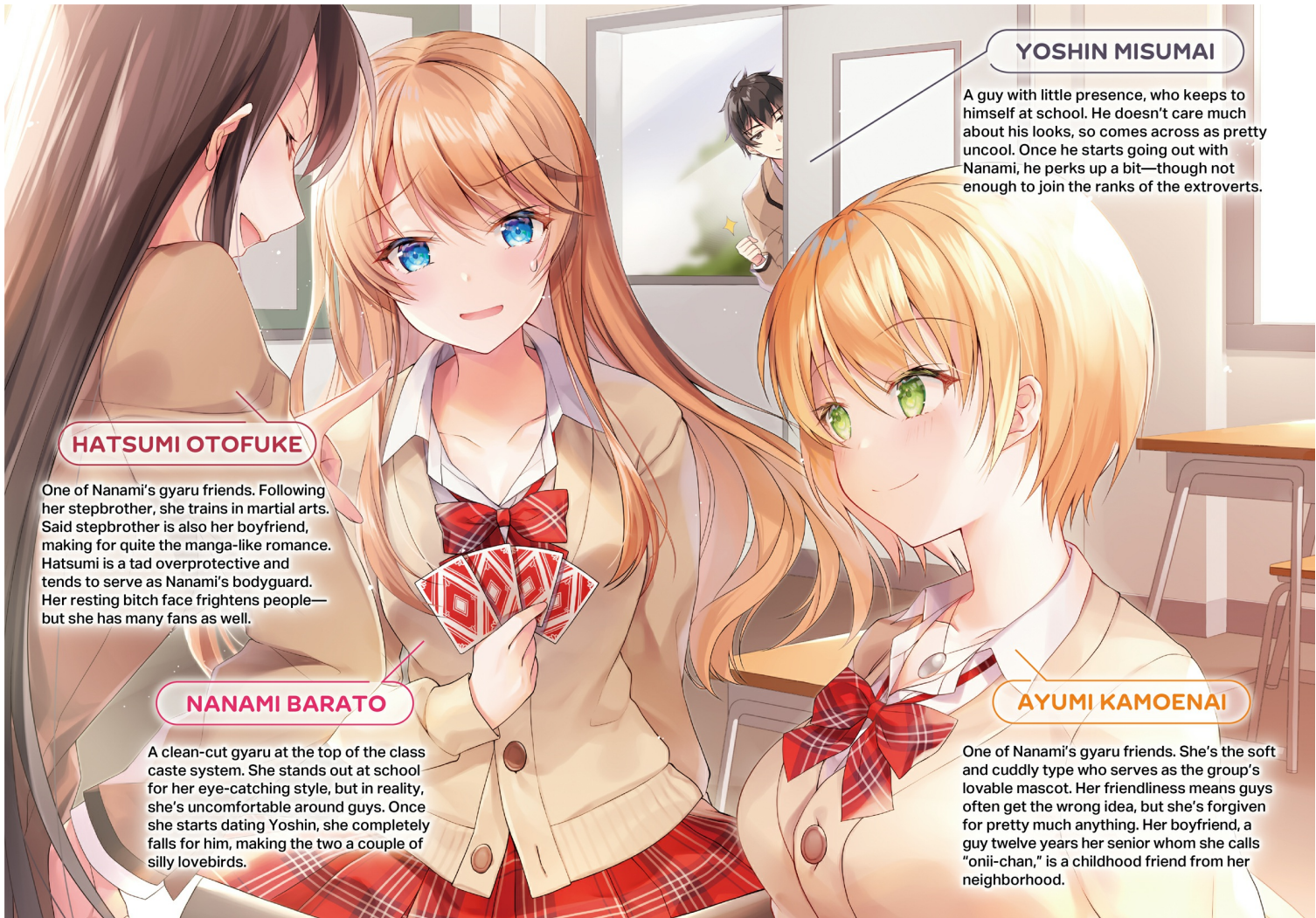
Yuishi

December 2021



She continued fumbling for words, failing miserably to get to the point. She was the epitome of a girl gathering her courage in order to confess to someone. It didn't seem like a dare at all.

“I...I-I-like...you, so, um, will you... go out...with me?”



YOSHIN MISUMAI

A guy with little presence, who keeps to himself at school. He doesn't care much about his looks, so comes across as pretty uncool. Once he starts going out with Nanami, he perks up a bit—though not enough to join the ranks of the extroverts.

HATSUMI OTOFUKE

One of Nanami's gyaru friends. Following her stepbrother, she trains in martial arts. Said stepbrother is also her boyfriend, making for quite the manga-like romance. Hatsumi is a tad overprotective and tends to serve as Nanami's bodyguard. Her resting bitch face frightens people—but she has many fans as well.

NANAMI BARATO

A clean-cut gyaru at the top of the class caste system. She stands out at school for her eye-catching style, but in reality, she's uncomfortable around guys. Once she starts dating Yoshin, she completely falls for him, making the two a couple of silly lovebirds.

AYUMI KAMOENAI

One of Nanami's gyaru friends. She's the soft and cuddly type who serves as the group's lovable mascot. Her friendliness means guys often get the wrong idea, but she's forgiven for pretty much anything. Her boyfriend, a guy twelve years her senior whom she calls "onii-chan," is a childhood friend from her neighborhood.



The girl standing before me, dressed the exact opposite to how she did at school, was indeed Nanami-san.

“I like gyaru fashion, but I actually like clothes like this a lot too... When we hang out, just the three of us, I tend to dress this way. Are you, um, disappointed?”

Bonus Short Stories

The Gyarū Speak Girl to Girl

Right after arriving at school with Yoshin, I'd ended up having to part with him. My two best friends, Hatsumi and Ayumi, were hanging around waiting for us.

I *really* wanted to spend more time with Yoshin, but I'd already doomed myself by telling my friends I'd spill what had happened with the confession yesterday. *You reap what you sow. Lesson learned.*

With my fate already decided, I let them pull me aside and took a moment to explain everything. However...

"Seriously, I think I'm gonna cry. Our Nanami's... Jeez, I can barely hold it together. I really am gonna cry. Like, I'm already tearing up," Hatsumi mumbled through withheld sobs.

"I'm right there with you! I'm sooo moved! Before now, I couldn't even picture them coming to school holding hands and stuff. Aw, I should've taken a picture," Ayumi whimpered.

The two of them were acting all dramatic and pretending to cry... Wait, were they *actually* crying? Was I making them worry that much? I was totally thrown for a loop.

The three of us were talking in one of the empty classrooms near our own. Since we'd arrived at school so early, we had more than enough time to kill, but I hadn't expected them to react like this. Their blubbering and wailing left me feeling kinda bad for wanting to get back to Yoshin. Wait, they *were* emotional, right?

It wasn't that I didn't want to talk to my friends. I was just worried about Yoshin getting mobbed by everyone in the class because we'd left him alone too long—especially since he and I had made such an alarming entrance.

Until yesterday, I'd only thought of Yoshin as a quiet boy in my class. For him to walk into that very class holding hands with someone would surely attract a lot of attention. I couldn't help but be concerned, leaving him by himself like that.

But this was all my fault, wasn't it? Oh, jeez. If I'd just thought for a moment, I would have been able to figure out that walking into class like that would've made a scene. I'd just gotten so carried away, damn it.

As I sat there feeling conflicted, Hatsumi and Ayumi were busy chattering about how we had to celebrate the momentous occasion.

"You guys are making too big of a deal out of this. All we did was hold hands!"

"Like hell we are!" Hatsumi cried. "We're talking about someone who's always kept her distance around guys, and now you're holding hands with one?! Of course we'd be emotional! It was the most touching thing we've seen in years—even more touching than a movie!"

So they really *were* moved. I'd thought they were just making fun of me. Even Ayumi was nodding in agreement.

Wait, seriously?

Just moments ago, they'd launched a full interrogation, but now they were overcome with emotion. I hadn't realized I was making them worry about me *that* much.

They often told me I was way too easily affected by people, but I felt like I could say the same for them right now. I mean, really, all we'd done was hold hands. But I guess it couldn't be helped—before then, I really *had* disliked being around guys.

"Anyway, for now, let's get back to Yoshin. I want to introduce you both to him," I said.

"Wow, you're seriously into him, huh?" Ayumi asked. She looked surprised, which was rare for her and her usually smiling face. "You totally are. Wait, didn't you only ask him out yesterday?"

No, I was just worried about him. It isn't like I'm all into him or... Right. It's

concern that I'm feeling. And besides...

"...I mean, I can't leave my boyfriend all alone on the first day. I should be with him."

I couldn't bring myself to look my friends in the face as I made my lame excuse. *Yeah, that's right. He's my boyfriend, so it'd be weird if I neglected him. I'm not seriously into him yet or anything like that. Really, I'm not.*

But...how could I think something like that when I waited for him at the station so early this morning? My face isn't super red or anything, is it?

I looked at my friends out of the corner of my eye. Of course, they were grinning like crazy, their expressions a mix of endearment and amusement. The two brought their faces closer to one another's and began to "whisper" in perfectly audible voices.

"She seems a bit desperate, doesn't she, Ayumi-san?"

"Sure does indeed. In fact, she seems to be struggling quite a bit, Hatsumi-san."

"What are you two talking about?!"

Just when I'd thought they cared...

"She's even calling him by his name!" Ayumi squealed. "Isn't this the first time she's done that? She's only ever called guys by their surnames."

"Yeah, seriously," Hatsumi said, pumping her fist for some reason. "It feels kinda special. Everyone's gonna flip."

Argh... I couldn't argue with that one. I was feeling slightly embarrassed, but what Hatsumi said next cleared my head immediately.

"Like, ignoring the dare, why don't you guys just keep going out?"

Hatsumi had the best intentions, but her words stabbed my heart nonetheless. They forced me to come face to face with the fact that I was only going out with Yoshin because of a dare—that even though it was just a dare, I had chosen to act on it, and that I was deceiving Yoshin.

Seeing my expression, Hatsumi knitted her brows in concern. "Sorry, that was

insensitive of me. I just hadn't seen it coming—you turning up to school with him, holding hands and stuff—so I got carried away.”

“Yeah... I had no idea that you could even make that kind of expression when you were with a guy. I'm sorry,” Ayumi added. She, too, sounded more serious than usual, apologizing to me directly rather than drawing out her words.

No, it's my fault, not yours. If I'd really wanted to, I could've refused to go along with it.

If I genuinely hadn't wanted to do it, neither Hatsumi nor Ayumi would have made me go through with it. That's why it wasn't their fault. I wanted to tell them that too, but they spoke before I could say anything.

“If Misumai ever finds out, you can blame it all on us,” Hatsumi said sincerely. “We won't make any excuses, and we'll be the ones to take the punishment.”

Ayumi nodded. “Yeah, I'll apologize with you. I'll say it was all on us and that you didn't do anything wrong.”

“What are you saying?” I asked. “We got ourselves into this together, so if any of us were to get punished, we'd all get punished together too.”

Even if I told them I was the one at fault, my friends would never have accepted it, so in the end, I made it the problem of all three of us.

I forced myself to smile. My friends smiled sadly back at me.

“That's true. If Misumai asks us to make up for it, we'll all do whatever it takes.”

“For real, we'll even accept sexual favors.”

“Wait, what?! Yoshin isn't like that!”

And just like that, the sadness around us dissipated.

How rude can they be? Besides, they both already had boyfriends, so anything sexual would be a no-go.

But sexual favors, huh...? If he were to ask, I wonder what Yoshin would— No, no, no!

“Well then!” I said, clapping my hands together. The sound echoed through

the empty classroom, and my two friends returned to their usual smiles. “Now that’s all out of the way, tell me how we can be more like a real couple. I don’t know anything about stuff like that. What I did today is really the best I had.”

“Hmm, let’s see... I guess going on a date is the classic way to go—a first date and a first kiss!”

“Wait a minute! A first date is fine, but isn’t it way too early for kissing?!”

“Then how ’bout more than a kiss?”

“I said it’s too early! Are you even listening to me?! And when you say more than a kiss, what’s more than a kiss?!”

I imagined what she might be thinking about and immediately turned bright red. I mean, I *was* a high schooler, so I wasn’t completely clueless, but all my knowledge was based in theory. I just knew about stuff like that from articles in magazines and stuff.

And kissing on a first date... I didn’t even know how to go about getting a first date! Was I supposed to ask after school? Did I have to ask him?

I mean, if the opportunity presented itself, then sure, but if not, then it was gonna be kinda hard. And when it came to kissing or doing anything more than that...

Wait. More than a kiss? Have these two done it already?! Have the sexual urges of young people already got the better of the two of them?!

As I sat there agonizing over my friends’ sexual status, Hatsumi and Ayumi turned their backs toward me.

Huh? What’s with that reaction?

A strange silence followed for several seconds, and then, with their backs still turned, the pair spoke up somewhat guiltily.

“Nah, actually, I’ve only kissed my boyfriend,” came Hatsumi’s hushed voice.

“Me too,” Ayumi said. “He won’t do anything more than that, even though I’ve asked him. And I’m always up for it, you know?”

Ayumi’s comment was a little concerning, but I ignored the topic for the time

being.

Was that so...? If Hatsumi and Ayumi hadn't made it past kissing, then not managing to do so myself shouldn't be a problem. I mean, those two had been with their boyfriends for a good long while now, and even they'd only gotten as far as kissing, so it couldn't be helped that I wasn't ready yet.

All at once, I calmed down and started to feel more at ease. Maybe my friends felt the same way, because they both seemed lost in their own thoughts. The first to break the silence was Ayumi.

"Other than that... Oh! You should eat lunch together! Lunch at school."

"Eat lunch with him? Is that a girlfriend-y thing to do?"

"Yup. Hatsumi and I haven't been able to before, so it'd be nice if you got a chance to. Oh, but you gotta tell us all about it afterwards."

Hatsumi nodded in agreement.

I see, so eating lunch with your boyfriend is something girlfriends do. Then I guess I made the right decision.

"Oh, good. I'm glad. That's perfect, 'cause I actually made Yoshin lunch as a thank-you for what he did for me yesterday. I was gonna tell him about it later."

It wasn't like I'd assumed my actions would be deemed appropriate, but I did feel a little glad that I'd been bold enough to try something out.

So I can do girlfriend-y things. Good job, me, for thinking about this yesterday.

As I gave myself a mental pat on the back, I noticed my friends looking at me strangely.

"Tell him...?"

"...Later?"

They tilted their heads in unison and gave me a questioning look. *Huh? Did I say something weird? Was making our lunch myself a bit too much?*

Oooh, I get it. Maybe there're things he doesn't like to eat! I already know what Hatsumi and Ayumi like, so I made it thinking it'd be no different, but maybe it'll end up being a bother for him...

“Nanami,” Hatsumi said, still staring at me in that strange way, “when we get back to the classroom, go straight up to Misumai and tell him you brought him lunch. As in, you should’ve told him beforehand! What are you gonna do if he already brought his own lunch?”

“Oh!”

Damn, that was true. Why hadn’t I thought of it? I’d been having so much fun making it that I neglected to consider the possibility. Of course you’d usually check first whether it was okay to bring them lunch. If Yoshin had brought his own bento from home, my gesture would be totally meaningless.

But hold up, isn’t it a bit much to bring a handmade lunch so early on in the relationship? Oh no. Did I maybe screw up?

“Wow,” Ayumi whispered with her sigh, making me turn slightly blue with worry. “To think Nanami would make such a rudimentary error. It’s actually kind of impressive.”

No, that’s not it. That’s not it at all. I didn’t mean anything by it; I just wanted to thank him for yesterday!

I didn’t even know who my excuses were for. More importantly, I had to hurry back so that I could check up on Yoshin. *He won’t reject the idea, will he? He doesn’t dislike handmade food, right?*

As we made our way back to our classroom, Hatsumi broke into a grin and, with her hands linked behind her back, called out to me. “Hey, so I thought of something that’s couple-ish that you can do. It’s related to that bento.”

“Oh? What is it?”

“When you get a chance, you should try feeding him. You know, with your own chopsticks, like we sometimes do,” Hatsumi said with a wink.

“Huh?!” I shrieked. “I can’t possibly do that!”

Feed...feed him myself? You can’t drop something like that on me. Now my mind was spinning with the idea, but my friends ignored my protests, moving on to discuss their own lunch plans.

“Man, if Nanami’s eating lunch with Misumai, what are we gonna do?”

“Hmm... Maybe I should ask onii-chan to come pick me up so that we can eat lunch together too.”

“Oh, that’s an idea. Maybe I’ll call up my brother too. Do you think he’ll come?”

“You two aren’t listening to me!”

In the end, I joined in their conversation, but my head was filled with anxiety.

Will Yoshin like the bento? Will he say it tastes good? I wondered.

It wouldn’t be long before I found out the answers to both those questions.

On the Way Home From Our Date

I know they say time flies when you’re having fun, but I’ve never thought that to be truer than I do today.

“Gosh, today was so much fun. Did you have fun, Yoshin?”

“Yeah, I think it was the first time in my life that I’ve had so much fun.”

“The first time in your life? Isn’t that a bit too dramatic?”

It might have sounded dramatic to her, but I couldn’t help feeling that way. Nanami-san laughed, seemingly amused.

“I mean, I got to go on a date with my very first girlfriend. As in, I got to go on a date with *you*, so of course it was the most fun I’ve ever had.”

“Really?”

No matter how much she doubted me, this was how I truly felt. Though her response suggested suspicion, she skipped a few steps ahead of me, a satisfied smile on her face.

As I was beginning to feel a touch of loneliness from the fact that her hand had left mine, Nanami-san turned to face me again.

“This was my first date too, and it was tons of fun. Honest.”

Both her words and her expression seemed to be brimming with genuine joy. Those words—spoken with emphasis, with our hands deliberately unlinked—

reverberated in my heart. She then reached her hand out to me again, and so I took it in mine, and we recommenced walking side by side.

Nanami-san had been reluctant to let me walk her back, but in the end, it was the right decision. After all, it was continuing the fun we'd been having.

A date isn't over until you accompany the girl back home.

I wasn't sure if there really were such a rule, but that was the thought floating around in my head.

A journey isn't over until you arrive back home.

Perhaps that wasn't the same thing, but at least both a date and a journey were meant to be fun. All we were doing was walking next to each other, but even that seemed like an irreplaceable moment.

"But maybe saying it's the most fun we've had is also a bit too dramatic. I mean, we're probably gonna have more fun in the future, right?" Nanami-san asked.

"I see, so we've got new records to set. Wow, that's a lot of pressure. I'll have to make sure you have fun on our next date too."

"What are you saying? I'm gonna work hard to make sure you have fun as well, so we're even."

"So, just how much fun *did* you have today?" I asked.

Nanami-san turned her gaze toward the ground, making me immediately panic that she actually *hadn't* enjoyed herself. However, before I could form such an anxious thought, Nanami-san looked up in surprise.

"Wow, come to think of it, it might have been the most fun I've had in my life too!" she said with a smile—that kind, joyful smile of hers like a flower in full bloom. "I guess we're the same after all."

I wasn't sure if she genuinely thought that way, but I made up my mind to believe her. I *wanted* to believe her. I hated that awful tinge of suspicion I still felt, but for now, I responded with a lighthearted remark so as not to let that feeling show through.

"Then we'll have to work hard to set a new record."

We smiled as we strolled along hand in hand, so elated that it almost felt like we were setting off for a date rather than heading home from one.

“What should we do for our next date? See another movie, chill out at home...? Oh, it’d be cool to have a stay-at-home date night so that we can watch the other movies in the series,” I suggested.

Nanami-san looked at me quizzically. “Does that count as a date too? Hmm... The other movies in the series, huh? It would be nice to watch those together.”

As I stood there wondering how the phrase “stay-at-home date” had managed to add itself to my lexicon, Nanami-san explained that she didn’t really know how they worked either but that she’d heard about her friends often doing it.

“I’ll think of some fun ideas for our next date too. Maybe *I* should invite *you* next time,” she said.

“This was supposed to be thanks for all the lunches you’ve been making me, so I almost feel bad that I’ve had so much fun.”

“Then how about you make me lunch sometime? Then as thanks for that, I can— Wait, do you even cook?”

“Not really... I’m not even sure I can fry an egg.”

Nanami-san seemed shocked, staring at me with her mouth hanging open—but you can’t underestimate the difficulty of frying an egg! For someone like me who had never really cooked, even *that* was a challenge. If you thought it was just about cracking an egg into a hot pan, you’d be wrong.

But telling that to Nanami-san might be like preaching to the choir.

Nanami-san, however, was giggling to herself happily. It wasn’t that she was ridiculing me—she just seemed to be having fun.

“Then maybe during our stay-at-home date I can teach you how to cook.”

“Aw man... I might end up making something really weird.”

“You’ll be fine—I’ll be teaching you everything step by step. It’s all about tucking in your fingers like a cat paw.”

Nanami-san balled up one of her hands into a soft fist and struck a cat-like pose. She looked so cute doing that, I couldn't help wanting to keep walking with her forever, just the two of us.

But all good things come to an end. Does the time to part feel more sad and lonely the longer the time of joy preceding it? This, too, was a new discovery.

"We're almost there, huh?" Nanami-san said.

"Yeah. It really was loads of fun. Would you, um, go out on another date with me?" I asked, just to make sure. I had to admit, a part of me worried that this would be our first and final date., but Nanami-san hit me with another beautiful smile.

"Of course!" she said.

When I saw that smile, all the worries pent up inside of me seemed to melt away in an instant, and an uncharacteristic thought flashed through my mind.

I hope we'll be able to make even more happy memories when we go on our next date together.

At the Table Together

In the last several days, I had come to feel strongly about the importance of eating with someone. Until now, I had only seen meals as a way to fill my stomach, so I hadn't really attached a sense of joy to eating.

Perhaps this was my parents' fault for working so much that I was often left eating alone. I knew it was a childish reason, but at least now I was able to admit the possibility because...

"What's wrong, Yoshin? Oh, was the grated daikon too spicy?" Nanami-san asked, her voice full of concern.

This was the reason. At that very moment, I was enjoying dinner at home with her.

"No, it's not spicy at all. It actually tastes kind of sweet. I like it. Why do you ask?"

“I dunno. I guess you looked like you were tearing up. Sometimes when something’s spicy, you can get all teary-eyed, don’t you?”

Did I really look like that?

Feeling embarrassed, I rubbed my eyes and found that they were slightly wet. “I think I was just moved by the fact I was eating a freshly cooked meal made by you.”

Even if I was just trying to change the subject, that was one hell of a cheesy remark. Still, I couldn’t come up with a better excuse for looking like I was about to cry.

But Nanami-san seemed to like what she’d heard, because her face lit up in response.

“Isn’t that a bit over the top, Yoshin? If this is all it takes to make you cry, then I’ll cook for you every day.”

“That’d be amazing. I’d be one lucky guy to be able to eat lunch *and* dinner made by you every day.”

Nanami-san laughed. “Wow, that sounded just like a marriage proposal right...there...”

Her sentence trailed away as we both blushed, and she quickly stuffed her mouth with a piece of gyoza. I followed suit, and we proceeded to eat in silence, but suddenly, as if she just couldn’t stand it, Nanami-san burst out laughing. Her laughter was pretty contagious, and I found myself laughing along with her.

“Jeez, Yoshin, you can’t just leave me hanging like that. I’m so embarrassed!”

“I didn’t think you’d bring up proposing of all things, so you’re not the only one.”

With that, the air between us lost its tension, and the atmosphere returned to normal.

Thank goodness... Oh, crap. I was so focused on eating, I finished my rice already. Maybe I should go get seconds.

Just then, Nanami-san extended her hand toward me.

“Huh?”

“Here, I’ll serve you some. Do you want a large helping? About the same as before?”

“Oh, um, yeah, about the same as last time’s good.”

I reflexively handed my bowl to Nanami-san. Still smiling, she took it from me and headed toward the rice cooker.

The moment she turned her back, I stood up so swiftly my chair toppled over, falling with a clatter to the floor. Shocked, Nanami-san turned to look at me.

“Gosh, you scared me. What happened?”

“No, um, nothing. It was nothing.”

Failing to explain myself, I sat back down in my chair. Nanami-san tilted her head in bewilderment but then continued to serve me my rice. It took all the strength I could muster to maintain my composure during these moments.

What in the world was I trying to do just now?

I’d been about to rush up to her and embrace her from behind. To bring her to my house and do such a thing would make it seem like *that* had been my intention from the beginning. I was the worst. Just being around guys made her all uncomfortable, so why the hell was I trying to scare her?

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.”

Unaware of my inner turmoil, Nanami-san cheerfully handed me my bowl. That one small gesture filled me with happiness despite my withheld guilt over witnessing such a beautiful expression.

“Hee hee... You know, this feels really nice,” Nanami-san said.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I never thought I’d be cooking for my boyfriend like this... Maybe this is what happiness feels like.”

I paused for a moment before agreeing with her. “Yeah, maybe it is.”

Just for this moment, it's okay for me to imagine she's actually my girlfriend, right? And I kinda hope we can continue being together, just like this.

Like a Cat

That day, at lunch, the rooftop was filled with a certain peacefulness. It was pleasantly sunny up there, and Nanami-san was snuggling close to me. Both the weather and her body were blessing me with a comfortable warmth.

Nanami-san must have felt the same way, because she was slowly beginning to doze off. Her drowsy expression was so adorable, I couldn't help but smile.

"Mmm, Yoshin...did you just laugh? Ngh..." Nanami-san rubbed her eyes like a cat, pouting as she spoke.

"I wasn't laughing. I just thought you looked sleepy. Did you not get enough sleep last night?"

"Mmm... When I'm leaning against you, I get sleepy because I feel safe...but I want to chat too..." she moaned, cuddling up even closer.

With her softness pressed up against me like that, I felt a little bit nervous. Of everything we'd done so far, this was the one thing I couldn't get used to. *Nanami-san, there may not be many people around, this is still the school rooftop.*

But she didn't seem to mind at all. She was acting like she wanted me to spoil her more, as if trying to make up for having had our moment interrupted by someone before now.

Still looking half asleep and wholly vulnerable, Nanami-san spoke up again. "Come to think of it, do you like animals, Yoshin...?"

Animals? Animals I like, huh? Looking at Nanami-san right now makes me think of...

"Maybe cats?"

I'd thought that about her earlier too. With that sleepy expression of hers, she looked just like a curled-up cat, her little hands suggestive of paws.

“Cats, huh...?” she asked thoughtfully before falling silent.

Given the peace of the situation, I never could have expected what she did next.

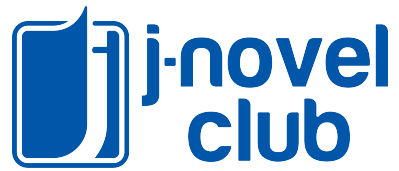
“...Meow.”

“Wha—?!”

Nanami-san had brought her lips up closer and meowed softly into my ear. It was just for a moment, loud enough only for me to hear—but it was definitely the meow of a cat.

When I blinked at her in shock, Nanami-san looked sleepily back at me and whispered, “I want meow attention...”

Whether she couldn’t speak clearly because she was sleepy or because of her class-act cat act for attention...I couldn’t quite decide.



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An Introvert's Hookup Hiccups: This Gyarū Is Head Over Heels for Me! Volume 1

by Yuishi

Translated by Satoko Kakiyama Edited by Stephanie Buck

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